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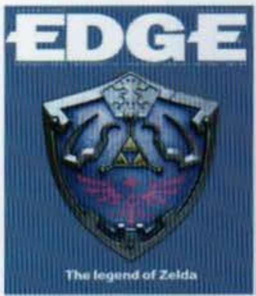
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The legend of Zelda


Jenga



People who play games and people who play and write about games have a number of shared vices, but one of the most common is anthropomorphism – especially when we're grumpy. So Sony, despite being a complex commercial entity formed of tens of thousands of people, making thousands of products in 100-odd countries, is 'arrogant'. Microsoft, despite being embodied by Bill Gates, the most extravagant philanthropist the world has ever known, is 'greedy'. But sometimes there's no escaping it, and for the last 12 months there's been only one word to describe Nintendo: tease.

It's a full year since the last Tokyo Game Show, when we sat in a hotel room with Shigeru Miyomoto and first laid hands on Nintendo's revolution in the making. A year of snatching tasters of *Galaxy* and tennis, of sweaty public events and rushed private shows: ten minutes here, half an hour there, before Wii smoothed down its skirts, checked its watch and said it had to be going. And so, for all that time, two questions have dominated. How will that controller feel after it's been in your hand for hours, not minutes? And can Wii play host to proper games – gamer's games – as well as dazzling novelties? And now we have our answers.

There's an irony that it was Zelda – noble, virtuous Zelda – that finally put out for Nintendo. Since the announcement that *Twilight Princess* was making the move to Wii, the company has been fobbing off players with a bland demo area, constructed purely to illustrate the uses of the controller. But this month we had our way with the real thing, and had time to explore its subtleties and secrets, time to adjust to the controller, and time to make up our minds. And so, starting on p66, you can read the real legend of Zelda, as we examine the history of the series, its significance for Nintendo, and the implications of its future. The waiting is nearly over.



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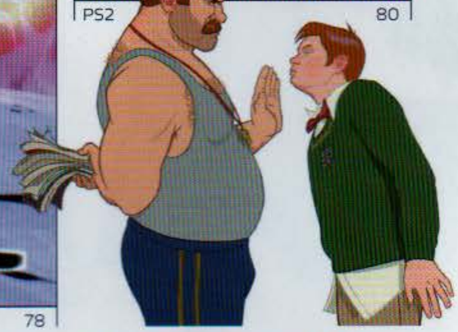


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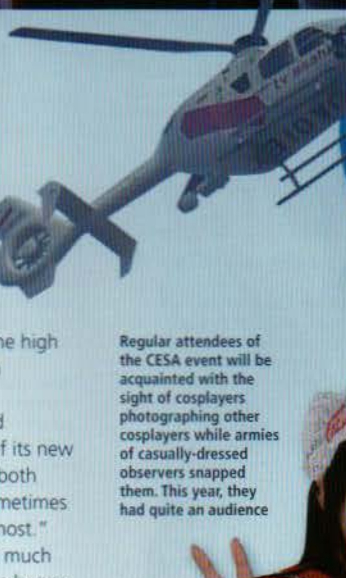



TOKYO
GAME
SHOW
2006



EVENT

Battle lines sketched at Tokyo Game Show



10th ANNIVERSARY!!

PS3 warms up as 360 plays on, but is Sony still off its game?

With Nintendo's preference for separate press gatherings holding firm – unsurprising considering its ongoing aversion to standing Wii next to its contemporaries – TGS was always going to be Sony's show. With Microsoft's 360 booth unglamorously tucked away in the Makuhari Messe's third hall, which with its predominance of third parties and negotiable crowds is still very much the *other* one, there was little to undermine the dominance of PS3, represented as it was by over 200 debug units and development kits, together with most of the movers and shakers of its opening line-up. Little, that was, beyond the persistent ambiguity of its software systems and a quite bewildering flight of fancy from **Ken Kutaragi**.

In a keynote speech that lasted little over an hour, to be followed by a tightly-engineered 'Q&A' session with Japanese publication NikkeiBP, the SCE president played not to the mob of journalists and photographers at the back of the house, but to a sea of black jackets and ties sat before him. Not that it made his job any easier, of course: the high price point announced at E3, together with transatlantic shockwaves from *that* press conference, have given Sony's investors and manufacturing partners a sour early taste of its new machine, with questions being raised over both short- and long-term competitiveness. "Sometimes eggs are thrown at me," he confided. "Almost."

With an unexpectedly select clip from a much larger show-floor trailer reel, the conference began with reassurance over PS3's blockbusting assets. *Ridge Racer 7* and *Gundam: Target In Sight* weren't the show's most outstanding expressions of Cell and RSX power, nor *Final Fantasy XIII* the most believable, but bunched together they left little doubt over one thing: in the fight for Japan's gamers, Sony still has the big guns.

Core to Kutaragi's speech, somewhere between the apologies and repetitions, was the Sony rhetoric of old, full of convergence talk and cross-industry ambition. Frustratingly, however, little made direct reference to the imminent PS3



Regular attendees of the CESA event will be acquainted with the sight of cosplayers photographing other cosplayers while armies of casually-dressed observers snapped them. This year, they had quite an audience



Though little has translated into widespread acceptance by the Japanese consumer, 360 continues to reap the rewards of its head start. While brows furrowed at PS3's poorly introduced *Afrika* (above) and suddenly DLC-heavy *Gran Turismo: HD* (right), *Blue Dragon* (below) enjoyed a more complete presentation. Posters for the Mistwalker title dominated the entire Makuhari area



The big issue

Epic talks straight to the TGS developer forum

As journalists struggled to exploit the comparative calm of the opening day, Epic Games made itself busy during the intimate TGS Forum. CEO Tim Sweeney began by paying tribute to the latest generation of multi-core processors, highlighting their importance for a sustained evolution in efficiency. The catch: they demand double the effort and development cost of their single-core predecessors. Cell, frighteningly, was singled out as demanding five times the resources, though added that a licensed part of Unreal Engine 3 – the Ageia PhysX package – is already substantially optimised for the PS3 CPU, with UE3 boasting a few tricks of its own. Interestingly, Sweeney expressed optimism regarding Sony's model for open PS3 development while criticising Microsoft's attitude towards user-created content. Citing the importance of the *Unreal* mod community as an example of Epic's specific interests, he alluded to plans for integrating user content into the forthcoming *UT2007*, which he confirmed was now slated for a Q3/Q4 2007 release.





As ever, despite publisher's best efforts, the most hypnotic part of TGS is the last five minutes, as the huge crowd disperses with the efficiency of a Cell AI demo

hardware, but instead to some distant, apparently speculative scenario in which an open database of user- and designer-created content would combine to break every bottleneck of modern industry, be that games, movies, pharmaceuticals, or anything else that could be plugged in to a Cell-powered network. Existing global infrastructure was made the bogeyman of this dream, with recent disruption to Japan's VoIP services symptomatic of its devilish influence.

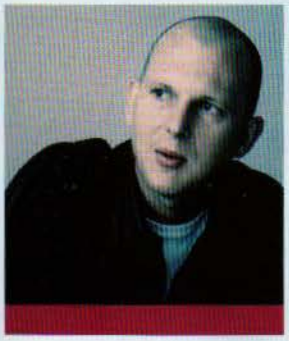
Both PS3 packages will ship with HDMI support, with the 20GB HDD package boasting a vastly reduced Japanese price point of ¥49,800 (£225)

For those that were keeping up – probably not the row in front, where some of our US colleagues were already in a state of apparent decline – the reaction was one of increasing mirth. There were chuckles, glances, eyebrows on the rise, and no doubt thoughts that if towering crises such as these could be fixed so neatly by Sony, then never mind the games, let's have a cure for cancer.

And minutes later, there it was. Sony's investment in Stanford University's Folding@Home project, which puts the idle CPU time of volunteer computers into intensive simulations of protein folding, was announced in August, but here received special mention as a case study in distributed computing. It was quite a leap from earlier announcements of downloadable Mega Drive and PC Engine games (later back-pedalled by a Sega announcement saying it couldn't confirm e-distrubtion) with most seeming too perplexed by its direction to marvel at its scope.

The concluding staged Q&A session at least saved the relevant until last. After talk of how life as an engineer has made him a slave to his own dreams, and further elaboration on this keynote's particular dream – the harnessing of collective wisdom to stem the decline in productivity, made possible by a unified grid of Cells – came the news that many had been hoping for. Both PS3 packages will now ship with HDMI support, but the surprise bonus was the announcement that the Japanese 20GB HDD package will benefit from a 20% price reduction, down to ¥49,800 (£225). Complaints

PHIL HARRISON, head of Sony Worldwide Studios



Photography: Martin Thompson

An evening in the 16th-floor lounge of Sony's Tokyo HQ saw the company sing in TGS with an informal brunch, reserved hands-on session and comparatively down-to-Earth presentation from **Phil Harrison**. Having enjoyed, with added scepticism, a tour of the XMB dashboard and its constituent parts – the realtime 3D slideshow is a nice touch, and certainly sexier than Windows Vista's – we took him aside to address some outstanding concerns about the new console.

How's the last year been for you?

It's not been the most enjoyable experience, some of it. But it was actually, probably necessary. I haven't been asked that question before – I don't know how to respond to it. It's been a year where we've been working extremely hard; obviously, pre-launch on a console is extremely difficult at any time. But the end result, I think, has been absolutely worth it. I'm delighted with everything that we're showing here and the format generally. So from a selfish point of view – from a Worldwide Studios point of view – I'll be looking at the titles here perhaps with a keener eye, and a greater sense of satisfaction.

Do you feel that the so-called hardcore – both gamers and journalists – sometimes shut themselves off to the bigger picture when judging conferences and expos?

It's not their fault – it's our fault. It's our fault for not doing a better job of explaining ourselves and positioning the titles in the context of their development arc. But I don't think that PS3 is different to any other console in its production, other than the simple fact that the expectations were so much higher.

And that extends to communicating the long-term potential of the machine?

Yes of course, and I wouldn't have said, by any means, we've finished delivering on that vision. But we're closer than we were at E3 this year. And as I've said before, console formats aren't defined by trade shows – they're defined by consumers going into stores and buying machines and games.

Part of Ken Kutaragi's keynote alluded to the time when PlayStation invested in the future of CD-ROM; now it has to create the future of Blu-ray. What is going to happen in the war with HD-DVD?

As we've painfully demonstrated, we're on the bleeding edge of technology. But that technology will mature very quickly – literally, within a matter of months it'll be a non-issue. We took an aggressive strategy in positioning PS3 for the future, so you're right – we are creating that future. But just by looking at the evidence of movie studio support and the intentions of the other consumer electronics companies, Blu-ray has every chance of being very, very successful. It'll be a positive factor for the differentiation of PlayStation 3.

"As we've painfully demonstrated, we're on the bleeding edge of technology. But that technology will mature very quickly...We need the Blu-ray disc as game developers"

And what of reports that Universal Studios has withdrawn its support for the format?

In the event that the movie advantage isn't clear – either because of the format itself not being widely adopted or some other reason – it actually doesn't matter, because we need the Blu-ray disc as game developers. All of the titles here today wouldn't fit on a DVD-9: Ted Price was saying the other day that *Resistance* was already 21-point-something gigabytes, and only getting bigger. And that's at launch. When we launched PS2, 90 per cent of the software volume was done on CD, and only 10 per cent on DVD. Within a year, that had gone to 50/50, and within two years it had inverted. So we'll see on PlayStation 3 a similar curve – we'll be pushing the 25GB threshold very quickly, and I expect this time next year we will see games that are justifying 50GB.

What kinds of extended media support will PS3 feature? iPods? Microsoft formats?

I'll find out what the default is, and we'll probably make a statement on that. But as you've seen with PlayStation Portable, it will increase over time. And none of this is down to technology – it's down to licensing and IP, and to a



Below: some of the S.T.A.R.S. of the TGS cosplay annex manage to somehow clear space for a roll call. Middle: the always popular *Gyakuten Saiban* courtroom in session. Bottom: A roll call of a different kind – the ladies of the Tecmo stand give tired photographers a reason to perk up







over the E3 price announcement (though not the prices themselves), were blamed for this retreat, and for endangering Sony's ability to lead gaming's latest, rather ill-defined trend.

In closing with a clip of *Afrika* – a beautiful safari shooter that swaps guns for cameras, yet in trailer form explains almost nothing – Kutaragi painted an unwitting portrait of both modern SCE and PS3, capable of wonders yet fanciful and unfocused. Having signalled a decline in creativity with developers becoming "passive, just waiting for what they'll be handed next," he'd produced little in the way of practical solutions, and even less in the way of reassuring product. Thankfully, that's where the show itself stepped in.

This was to be TGS's busiest year, as the 192,411 attendees who crammed on to its floors would prove. The first of its public days – the Saturday – saw 84,823 of them successfully gridlock the primary hall, with the central junction of Sony, Capcom, Konami and Bandai Namco stands only navigable via rivulets of determined, rapidly dehydrating people. A somewhat incestuous relationship existed between those four exhibitors, the first bringing Japan its most comprehensive glimpse of PS3 software, the rest casting spotlights on their own specific contributions and thus shouldering the burden.

Predictably, it felt less like a launchpad than a testbed at times, and it was disheartening to see so many games once thought to be leading the charge now bringing up the rear. Only on that second day did *MotorStorm* finally present a build that did it justice, while still being advertised as 60 per cent complete. *Heavenly Sword* wheeled out an E3 demo that, with its laboured animations and numbing controls, did little to break the local apathy towards gaijin products. *Lair* pulled as much

certain extent our own resources, and our own ability to implement certain technologies. But you can see that, fundamentally, MPEG-based formats are supported, along with the AVC video format. Through USB, your mass-storage devices will be visible to the hardware.

Will that peripheral hardware support be limited to Sony's own products?
Absolutely not. You saw from the format definition that we support SD, Compactflash, Memory Stick in all its variations and USB. Any digital still camera that complies with the DFC formats can be used by PS3.

How would you distil Ken Kutaragi's keynote vision into a single statement?
I can't really speak for Ken, but this is really just my own comment. In the PlayStation 2 era, and everything that came before it, going all the way back to Atari VCS, the game console market has been almost exclusively defined by packaged media, and that media itself represents the entirety of the creative experience the user will get. There have been some exceptions, but on a fundamental level that's been the case. What PS3 starts is the era where the package is just the beginning of the relationship with the customer. So Ken's vision is

> "How do you engage with your user base on a regular basis? How do you allow your user base to influence your worlds as creators themselves? These are fundamental changes in the way we make games"

really a call to action to ask the industry – in Japan particularly, but also worldwide – to start thinking about what that means for game design, but also for service design.

That's a phrase that I think needs to become more understood: how do you engage with your user base on a regular basis? How do you allow them to influence you as a designer? How do you allow your user base to influence your worlds as creators themselves? These are fundamental changes in the way we make games, and this is the world that Ken was alluding to.

So does the failure of 360 to introduce that frame of mind to Japan reflect a shortcoming of the machine itself, or simply the circumstances of Microsoft's relationship with the Japanese?
I don't know. I wouldn't want to speculate on that. Also, PlayStation 3 has format differences which better place it for that kind of goal, particularly the open nature of its network functionality, and the ubiquitous nature of its writable hard drive.

One of the biggest fears to go with that open nature is security. How do you know the machine will be safe with an open Linux backbone?
It's a matter of public record. In fact, you can read on certain open forum websites how the Cell chip has been designed with encryption security at its heart. It'd be foolish of me to say never, but I'd be confident in saying that the security built into Cell gives us... safety.

After the price announcement today, will there be a long-term strategy of levelling out the PS3 price worldwide?
Well, what we did today was bring the Japanese price in line with the US and European consumer prices – less than 500 *somethings*. While I know that it's not the financial exchange rate, it's the consumer electronics exchange rate which has been well understood for years. There are reasons for it: the cost of doing business in Europe is higher, proximity of the factory to the Japanese consumer...

What level of freedom will PS3 have when connecting to the internet?
It's a Flash-enabled browser; in fact, the Tokyo Game Show site we just showed is a Flash site. There obviously have to be some limitations to its functionality, because you couldn't, for example, download a PC or Mac executable and expect it to run. But it is as open as you could conceivably expect it to be.

Does that not open the door to viruses, spyware and other such nasties?
No, because the ability to download and run an executable on PS3 comes through the PlayStation Store – and encryption and DRM are part of the download policy.

Should we expect to see the PS3's XMB upgraded in the same way as the PSP version has been?
You certainly should. What you've seen here tonight is just the beginning.

Recently, Immersion proposed a solution for combining haptic feedback with tilt sensing in the PS3 controller – something Sony declared impossible. Why did you turn down that proposal?
I can't comment on that.





Lost Odyssey (right) could barely have claimed to offer more than the trailers for *Metal Gear Solid 4* (above) and hitherto unseen Level 5 RPG *Shirokishi* (below), its enormously popular hands-on sessions almost entirely consisting of random battles and non-interactive cutscenes. *Shirokishi* came with Phil Harrison's specific recommendation, and not without reason – it looks spectacular









Portable ops

TGS again provides mobile gaming with a call to arms

As ever, the mobile phone sector occupied much of the show floor, with 125 titles lining the booths of companies such as Konami, From Software, and Ride On Japan. Square Enix titles such as *Front Mission 2089* and *Dragon Quest: Monsters* diverted a fair amount of attention away from the overburdened *Final Fantasy* theatre. Needless to say, the mobile industry found itself incorporated into Ken Kutaragi's boundless vision of a Cell-enabled future, though cynics will groan at his specific area of interest: PS3-related micropayments.



of a crowd as could squeeze into the corridors of pods and barriers, but the single tutorial and mission demo served better as an ambassador of tilt control than as an overall showcase. *Resistance: Fall Of Man* and *Warhawk* enjoyed pride of place, though were slightly underwhelming, and the always disappointing *Gran Turismo HD* welcomed crowds with sit-down cabinets, upscaled textures and a newly-adopted (or imposed) fondness for micropayments and downloadable content.

Among the likeliest candidates for day one shipment were the immensely popular *Ridge Racer 7* (the show's least stable code, crashing PS3s as if it bore a grudge), the intriguing *Eye Of Judgment*, the 1080p but offline-only *Virtua Tennis 3* (*Power Smash 3* in Asia), the same *Sonic The Hedgehog* that will shortly arrive on 360, and Studio Liverpool's evidently accomplished *Formula One '07*. In the neighbouring theatre, meanwhile, a rotation of crisp HD trailers accounted for absentees such as *Metal Gear Solid 4* (just a short one this time at only six minutes), while introducing the likes of *Ninja Gaiden Sigma*, a PS3-exclusive remake of the Xbox game.

At Microsoft's stand, it was tough to decide whether the air was of confidence, grim determination or contented resignation. It was

Microsoft's influence reached far beyond the glare of its stand. In the standout PR coup of TGS, its *Blue Dragon* shoulder bags/personal billboards were notably larger than Sony's PS3 equivalent, the result being immediate ubiquity











For many, *Lost Planet* (above) was the best game at TGS purely by virtue of its neverending trailer. Its demo pods, however, seldom experienced the levels of interest enjoyed by its video screens

probably all three. With the upcoming HD-DVD peripheral and Windows Vista kept wisely to one side (though the former enjoyed its own stage presentation), this tightly-coiled maze of playable code took advantage of its limited space. As a result, reports of its popularity have since been greatly exaggerated. Yes, there were two-hour queues for Sakaguchi epics *Blue Dragon* and *Lost Odyssey*, but with both games kept strictly behind closed doors and to quite lengthy hands-on sessions, Microsoft Japan was clearly wringing the very most out of its two star attractions.

Conspicuous by their absence were most of 360's western highlights, with the likes of *Gears Of War* and *Forza Motorsport 2* limited to overhead trailers. Shining in their place were local developments such as *Project Sylpheed*, *Dead Or Alive Xtreme 2*, J-Pop management game *The Idolm@ster*, the always photogenic *Lost Planet* and *Trusty Bell* – a gorgeous contender for game of the show.

Completion was a rare commodity at TGS, with development times stretching and the consequences for pushing them ever-more severe, and in this respect Microsoft stole the show. Given the firm foothold of its year-old hardware, that was the least that could really be expected. You could walk away from its stand with a mind to filling imminent game hours with substantial, well-rounded products, while Sony could only promise that by sometime around spring 2007 you'd be feeling the same about its own.

The difference between TGS and E3, however, was that here the PS3 promise felt real rather than illusory. The likes of *MotorStorm* and Level 5's *Shirokishi Monogatari* (*White Knight Story*) are already hinting at the monstrous potential Cell and RSX hold for games, and in this sense spoke for Kutaragi in making the machine look like a long-term champion. But the intervening months are going to ask some very difficult questions.

At a time when the competition are working their games deftly into overarching packages, with ideologies and compelling arguments for an online future, Sony, for all its rhetoric, has little that compares. PS3's infrastructure remains a mystery, and its online functionalities seem vague, disparate and hastily improvised. Its XMB (Cross-Media Bar) dashboard feels lazily adapted from PSP's, and grudging in its acceptance of new features such as friends lists. Wireless interface aside, the controller looks increasingly like a designed-by-committee anachronism, its tilt technology a white elephant shuffled into rumble's place, with a long way to go before it proves itself more than a compromised novelty.

Production difficulties and anomalous prices might go hand-in-hand with sophisticated



Wireless interface aside, the controller looks increasingly like a designed-by-committee anachronism, its tilt technology a white elephant shuffled into rumble's place

technology, but without sweeteners such as a cohesive brand experience they're difficult to swallow. With PSP still begging for greater attention, grossly neglected at TGS with only a handful of incidental games and peripherals on show, there are opportunities for unification and galvanisation that Sony either doesn't see, or is simply failing to communicate. Therein lay the message of TGS 2006. While it's still foolhardy to underestimate the power of PlayStation, it's easy to overestimate the vision.



News of *GT:HD Premium* and *Classic* had fans up in arms, until clarification from Polyphony revealed them to be two parts of the same package. Tracks such as the Eiger Nordwand hillclimb have been built with PS3-exclusive assets, and will act as a *Prologue*-style early glimpse of *GT5*









EVENT

Microsoft reports in

Peter, Peter, Banjo and the Chief work hard at X06 – but it's movies that have the final say, not games

There must be times when **Peter Moore** has to pinch himself. Not many men get to launch a console; fewer still get to launch ones whose underdog status is complemented by its technical power, aggressive online ambitions and a year or so's head start on its rival. Hardly anyone gets to do that twice, and no one, you would think, would get to do it twice when the first knocked its makers out of the hardware business. But here he is, strolling around on stage with a competitor-eating grin and a fistful of numbers, more than ready for the battle to come.

Microsoft had a year to prove it could take control of next-generation gaming, and its X06 event was in effect handing in its report card. And its success is in many ways rather hard to judge.

Microsoft had a year to prove it could take control of next-generation gaming, and its X06 event was in effect handing in its report card



Microsoft events are always slick, but the modernist conference facilities used for the second day bordered on the mirrored

Five years ago, the idea of Microsoft establishing itself so thoroughly as a gaming force seemed faintly ludicrous. But equally, in a year when Sony has fumbled its public relations so badly and at a time when that fumbling is about to end and the real power of PlayStation – its brand – is about to start its engines, has Microsoft really done enough? Moore thinks it has. Those numbers, initially promised at E3, are holding fairly steady: ten million 360s to be sold by "the holiday season" (a small adjustment from E3's promise of "by PS3 launch"), and 60 per cent of the user base using Xbox Live (across both Gold and Silver-level access).

Then came the games, and with them a new level of confusion: prepare to expand your understanding of 'exclusive'. First come the old-fashioned exclusives. Microsoft Game Studios' *Forza Motorsport 2* was given a chance to shine, in a more concrete form than its thrilling E3 demo. *Project Gotham Racing 4* got a moodier debut, with an atmospheric video which communicated little about the direction the game will take. The teaser animation for the a new *Banjo Kazooie* game seemed to reveal only a few seconds of an amazingly bland meadow, complete with a few forlorn Jiggies, but actually demonstrated something much more crucial – the huge warmth and affection that the audience still has for Rare's characters. Other exclusives announced include Cryptic Studios MMO based on Marvel characters, the two parties presumably recovered from their legal spat over *City Of Heroes*' potential for copyright infringement. And happily, for fans of old-fashioned RPGs, both *Blue Dragon* and *Lost Odyssey* were confirmed for western release.

Most rapturously received, a little contrarily for a roomful of people who wouldn't usually take the

Newswire



Unlucky Clover

Despite the critical success of recent releases such as *Okami* and *God Hand* (reviewed on pp 78 and 88) Clover Studio closed its doors on October 12 after being dissolved by parent company Capcom. At the time of going to press it appeared that the studio had fallen victim to internal restructuring at the publisher.

Founded by creator Atsushi Inaba in 2004, the company's intention was to inject new life into the publisher's line-up: in that respect, as all Clover's IPs will be transferred back to Capcom, they may posthumously succeed.

As for its star developers, Inaba himself and Hideki (Devil May Cry, Okami) Kamiya will not be returning to Capcom, but Shinji (Resident Evil 4) Mikami is to continue with the company.









While there were few killer announcements, the best received were the arrival of *Sensible Soccer* (top left) on Live Arcade (an idea we introduced to Jon Hare during an **Edge** interview many months ago), a new *Banjo Kazooie* from Rare (top right), Ensemble Studio's *Halo Wars* RTS (bottom left) and Bizarre Creations' trailer for *Project Gotham Racing 4*, which was higher on atmosphere than information

slightest interest in an RTS, was the announcement of Ensemble Studio's *Halo Wars*, whose potential and form can be pretty much perfectly deduced from what you know of the *Halo* universe, and what you know of Ensemble's rock-solid reputation. Following this was the news that Irrational's *Bioshock* and Sam Fisher's next *Splinter Cell* instalment would both be Microsoft-only releases. But then came the announcement that Eidos' *Kane & Lynch* and Pivotal-developed *Crossfire* will "debut exclusively" on Microsoft platforms. Which sounded a little like how the *GTAIV* download episodes promised at E3 will be "content exclusive" to 360, which means that while you won't be able to get those episodes on PS3, there's no reason to assume Rockstar won't make different, but similar, content available for Sony's download service.

But the biggest cheer of the evening went not to a games but a films. First, as Moore announced a November release date for the 360's add-on HD-DVD drive, which goes on sale for £130, packaged with a 360 remote and copy of King Kong, and then as that film's director, Peter Jackson, took to the stage to announce the formation of Wingnut Interactive. This partnership with Microsoft Game Studios which will see the director create new hybrid game-film projects, the first of which will be set in the *Halo* universe. Despite the applause, he seemed understandably overwhelmed by the task – at which so many have failed before – of marrying filmic narrative with satisfying game interaction. His endorsement of 360 is nonetheless a coup.

And what did Microsoft bring home from X06? Straight As or a must-try-harder? Both, it would seem. Regaining the limelight will be a huge challenge once PS3 arrives, but pleasing its ten million converts looks like a done deal.



WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

Until PS3 and 360 begin properly trading blows, justifying the purchase of an HDTV will mean wiring it to absolutely anything that can output the right number of pixels. That doesn't just include the PC – it places it right near the top of the pile. But as more and more gamers set their Shuttle cases alongside their consoles, the cost of the endeavour becomes agonisingly clear – PC games don't traditionally favour widescreen resolutions, and especially not without distorting the likes of Max Payne to pygmy-like proportions. Efficient, navigable and particularly friendly, The Widescreen Gaming Forum has ably established itself as the champion of this new cause, and already features a wealth of fixes and hacks.

Site:
The Widescreen Gaming Forum
URL:
www.widescreengamingforum.com







Although Peter Jackson received rapturous applause at the evening event the night before, it had become clear by his morning session with Peter Molyneux and Bioware's Greg Zeschuk that there was a long way to go before his vision would take shape



SOUND BYTES

"I had a Nintendo for a while so I got pretty good... I need everyone who's going to come kill me to please dress up as an 8-bit duck."
Blogger Jason Fortuny on buying a gun after receiving death threats following his sex-ads sting

"We want to appeal to mothers who don't want consoles in their living rooms, and to the elderly and to young women. It's a challenge, like trying to sell cosmetics to men."
Nintendo boss Satoru Iwata has us all sold on the Wii – and caused a rethink on the subject of lipstick.

"My only question for this Christmas on Wii is the price point... at AU$400 (£160) plus whatever you need to buy accessories-wise, I'm guessing you need to spend about AU$500 (£200) to take home a Wii and enjoy it. I think that price point is still not family entertainment because AU$500 is a lot to fork out."
Pot Michael Ephraim of Sony Australia on Nintendo's kettle.

"So cooking dinner, going to Lamaze class, there's no way to figure that into a game at this point. Maybe somebody else can do it and maybe somebody will, but that wasn't really what this game was about."
David Chase, writer and creator of The Sopranos on *The Sopranos: Road To Respect*.

"Released at the end of this month, the sick game is expected to be another massive hit for the company which also created the lawless *Grand Theft Auto* series."
Who else but the Daily Mail, this time foaming at the mouth about *Canis Canem Edit*.





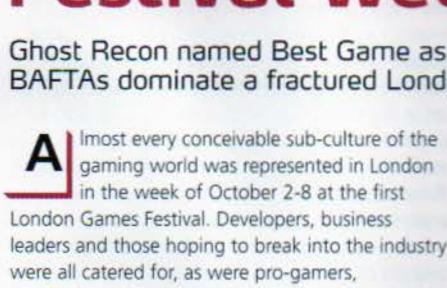
EVENT

Awards boost Festival week

Ghost Recon named Best Game as the revamped BAFTAs dominate a fractured London Games Fest

Almost every conceivable sub-culture of the gaming world was represented in London in the week of October 2-8 at the first London Games Festival. Developers, business leaders and those hoping to break into the industry were all catered for, as were pro-gamers, academics and intellectuals, and even the general public. But despite a shared focus on encouraging participation in the industry – highlighted by the Dragon's Den-style 'Lizard's Lair' event – and the centrepiece of BAFTA's relaunched Video Game Awards, the week did little to unite a fractured view of gaming, or to consolidate its reputation.

LocoRoco's success in the fascinating new Best Character category was a triumph for a pure gaming aesthetic

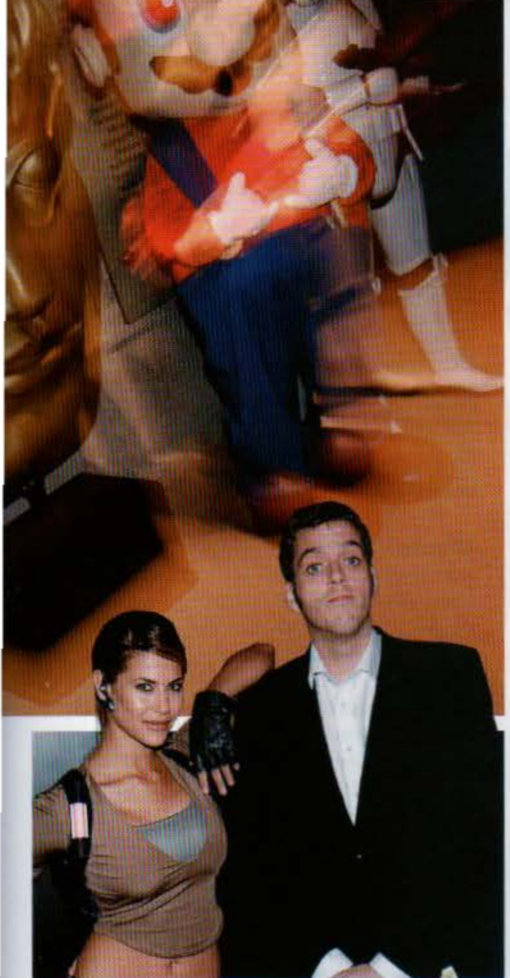


While the recruitment fair was well received, the GDCL struggled to make its mark, its efforts not helped by memories of the similar themes, blue skies and sunny beaches of Develop Brighton

The London Games Career Fair was judged a great success, although the two-day GDC London conference felt narrowly programmed and low-profile compared to GDCEs past. Chris Williams of LucasArts was a star speaker at both, and his 'next-gen is not just about graphics' second-day keynote at GDC was rapturously received, as was Michael Khaimzon's discussion of high-def outdoor environments. In the other keynote, SCE Worldwide's Jamie MacDonald bravely attempted to outline Sony's vision of a networked future without giving away the closely-guarded details of what that will mean on PS3.

On the public side, the Fringe events were among the week's most interesting – including a debate on artificial intelligence, an attempt to draw up a list of classic games, and exhibitions of alternative art-gaming, machinima and digital film-making – but, scattered throughout the week and across multiple venues, stood little chance of cross-pollinating audiences and ideas. Similarly, the World Series e-sports event, boasting an appearance from world number one Fatal1ty, was a great opportunity to raise the burgeoning profile of pro-gaming and provide a public focus for the festival. Instead, it took place in the darkest and scruffiest bowels of the already bewildering Trocadero centre, was overrun with stands loudly hawking sponsors' wares and actually required attendees to leave via the cargo lift. It looked, and felt, like a dark and disreputable ghetto – hardly a progressive image for the medium.

And so it fell to the BAFTAs – or rather BAVGAs – to shoulder the weight of the festival for both



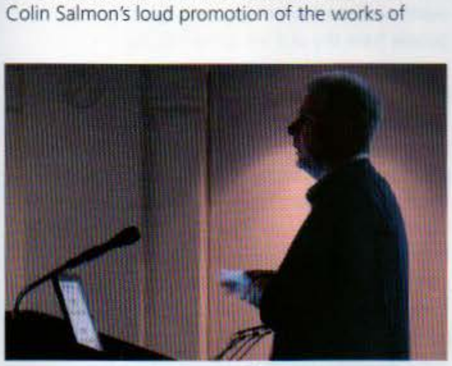
london games festival 2006



Most agreed that Iain Lee (left) stole Vernon Kay's thunder with a little judicial swearing and some genuine gaming insight – and despite marketing veteran Al King's best efforts (above)

public and industry. As probably the most prestigious games awards in the world, and with E4 due to televise them later in the month, they were well placed to do so, but they didn't manage it without sending out a few mixed messages along the way. Despite the Academy's best intentions to trumpet the creative validity of the medium, games may never be accepted as a serious art form if the individuals being recognised are not named and the people actually on stage making an acceptance speech are not identified. It was often hard to tell if they were creatives or suits: in one instance, Tim Schafer was talked over by a disinterested audience as he accepted a richly deserved Screenplay gong for *Psychonauts*; soon after, the UK PR director of a major publisher got a warm round of applause. Host **Vernon Kay**'s jokes at the expense of the perceived geekiness of his audience, and actor Colin Salmon's loud promotion of the works of movie director Paul Anderson were also uncomfortable moments, but Duran Duran's Nick Rhodes presenting an award as his *Second Life* avatar raised a smile.

Nonetheless, the award categories were relatively well-defined, the view of gaming broad, the nomination fields strong and the majority of winners deserving. *LocoRoco*'s success in the fascinating new Best Character category was a triumph for a pure gaming aesthetic; *Buzz!* won out in an exceptionally strong Casual and Social Gaming field; *Electroplankton* winning Audio was a surprise nod to art-gaming and *Brain Training*, *Guitar Hero* and *Lego Star Wars II* were all popular winners, though the latter's selection in the Gameplay category might stir some debate. *Dungeons & Dragons Online* beating both *Battlefield 2* and *Animal Crossing* to Best Multiplayer was perhaps the biggest surprise. Sony was the night's big winner, netting two BAVGAs each for *LocoRoco* and *Shadow Of The Colossus* on top of *Buzz!*'s gong. *Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter*'s award for Best Game (on top of an earlier Technical Achievement nod) raised a few eyebrows, although perhaps not as many as the omissions of *Colossus* and *Oblivion* from the nominees list. But by that stage, the audience was already pondering dinner, and the significance of the freebie Lego Batman keyrings on their placemats. "Here's to more high scores and more numb bums!" shouted a departing Kay, beneath projected *Pac-Man* and *Defender* graphics. Here's to fewer such stereotypes next year.



Jamie MacDonald is always a well-received speaker, but tackling the network environment at a time when PS3 developers are grumbling about a lack of detailed information was a tricky task

BAVGA winners in full

Some shocks and some we saw coming a mile off

- **Action & Adventure:** Shadow Of The Colossus
- **Strategy:** Rise & Fall: Civilizations At War
- **Casual:** Buzz! The Big Quiz
- **Children's:** LocoRoco
- **Simulation:** The Movies
- **Multiplayer:** Dungeons & Dragons Online: Stormreach
- **Sports:** Fight Night Round 3
- **Innovation:** Brain Training
- **Character:** LocoRoco
- **Artistic Achievement:** Shadow Of The Colossus
- **Technical Achievement:** Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighte
- **Screenplay:** Psychonauts
- **Audio:** Electroplankton
- **Soundtrack:** Guitar Hero
- **Original Score:** Tomb Raider Legend
- **Gameplay:** Lego Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy
- **Best Game:** Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter

OUT THERE



PLAY GIRLS

Apparently knowing a 'good thing' when it has found one, Playboy magazine has undressed its third series of gaming centrefolds for its November issue. The latest spread, released early to Gawker Media's lineup of blogs in pre-production form with simple blocked out text and preliminary design sketches, features *Tabula Rasa*'s Sarah Morrison, two Femmes Fatale from *Scarface*, a pair of diaphanous women from *God Of War II*, *Bullet Witch*'s Alicia Claus, *Timeshift*'s Dr Jasmine Lin, and Enrica, due to appear in the forthcoming *Splinter Cell: Double Agent*. While there's none of last year's irony – a nude Carla from *Fahrenheit* was featured despite sex scenes having been cut from the game's US release – it still hasn't managed to fully alleviate a certain underlying unseemliness. Despite all the rationale of Playboy as being for adults, despite the selection of characters from mature-rated games, and despite a universal wish to see gaming mature as a medium, it's still not fully clear that a bit of bared cyber-flesh exactly qualifies as that leap forward.

www.playboy.com

INTERVIEW

Red 5 standing by

What do you do after leading the troops who built the fastest growing virtual nation in the world?





Founded by the team lead of *World Of WarCraft*, and staffed by veterans of *Uru*, *StarCraft*, *Diablo*, *Oddworld*, *Pilotwings 64* and *Rise Of Nations* – as well as George Clooney's former assistant and the man who invented the Gamertag – Red 5 Studios has a unique perspective on the future of the MMO. Currently at work on the studio's first unannounced project, president and CEO **Mark Kern** is playing his cards far too close to his chest to talk about specifics. We asked instead about how the man who led the last MMO revolution intends to engineer the next.

It's been a year since you founded the studio – how did Red 5 come about?

I kind of took a break from gaming after I left Blizzard. I'd just started a family and I was looking around for what I wanted to do next. I realised that my heart really was in games, and I was intrigued by the possibilities that were opening up, and so I knew that Bill Petras, the art director for *World Of WarCraft*, and now the VP of creative design at Red 5, had also left. He and I got together and we really started talking about a couple of new ideas, and the idea that we're really working on now is the one that stuck. And then Taewon Yun joined us a little later. He was the co-founder of Blizzard Korea and we'd worked very closely together on the launch of *WOW* in Asia, and we felt that the true success of these games lay in globalisation. You know, *WOW* was the first MMO that was successful in Europe, Asia and the United States, and in order to capitalise on and justify the high cost of development we realised that we had to be a truly global company from day one, and so Taewon brings that to the table, and we're effectively a global organisation now.

When you left a year ago, were you expecting *WOW* to go as big as it has?

You know, always, in our heart of hearts I think we knew we were on to something, but I think we were all surprised by the scale of it. It's not that we thought the game would be limiting in some fashion in terms of gameplay, it's just that we were looking at the hard numbers of: 'Hey, if you take our existing games, and you look at the new requirements that this game imposes – you have to pay to play, you are required to have an internet connection' – you'd think that that automatically diminishes your audience. But in fact, it's done nothing of the sort and, you know, I think the guys at Blizzard have done a great job in making *WOW*. It's deserved, but surprising.

"It's a gameplay experience where you have thousands of players doing whatever they want, whenever they want, and few people have the skill-set to handle that"

Do you think people have been able to form a decent understanding of why it's been so successful or do you think it's still quite a misunderstood game?

Hmmm. I've been reading up on people's commentary and analysis here and there, and I don't think any one person's got it completely right. Different people understand different aspects of it, but one that's been overshadowed is when people look at the numbers and they say: 'Oh my god, six million subscribers, that's many, many times the height of *Everquest*, which was 500,000 subscribers,' and when you look at it that way, it seems very daunting, and some people say that's a flash-in-the-pan kind of number. But if you look at it again, globally, you'll realise that in the US that number's only probably a million, so you're only looking at twice the magnitude. And if you look at the market penetration of *Everquest*, which was probably five per cent of the gaming core, I think you can see plenty of potential and room here and I don't believe that *WOW* is an outlier in any way, shape or means.

MMOs are complicated to build and maintain. Is there a skills shortage?

I think so. I'm reminded of the rush after the early success of some of these multiplayer games to add multiplayer functionality into gaming. But there's a whole new vocabulary of design you have to learn – the way you have to design a multiplayer experience is completely different from a singleplayer experience. And the technology was vastly different. And companies who tried to shoehorn multiplayer aspects into singleplayer games at the last minute got into a lot of trouble, because from a gameplay perspective it didn't work, and from a technology perspective it delayed their games because they essentially had to rewrite everything. And I think you see that now, as people are attracted to MMOs, there's simply not enough expertise, particularly in North America and Europe. And everything is ten times harder in MMO. It's a gameplay experience where you have thousands of players doing whatever they want, whenever they want, and you have to account for that. Few people have the skill-set to handle that.

There seems to be a clear split emerging between monthly subscription models and micropayments. Do you think that there's a need to choose between those models, or is there another way?

I think it's true that the business model is very fluid right now, but I think part of the appeal of the micropayment strategy within an MMO – not taking into account micropayments for Xbox Live which is a very different kind of animal – is that it's a self-fulfilling prophesy. It started in China where you had a lot of ageing MMOs that didn't have a very strong subscriber base, and they needed to

Newswire



Edge presents...

On November 9, Edge launches a new series of special collector's editions entitled Edge Presents File. Dedicated to archiving the magazine's rich legacy, File will bring together landmark reviews, interviews, features and more from the publication's history, which dates back to 1993. Costing £8, the first edition of File will focus on the first 12 months of Edge's life, an era which saw the unfolding of Sony's plans to enter the videogame hardware market with its PlayStation, the arrival of the CD-ROM era and virtual reality's attempts to revolutionise the videogame space.



The DNA of a new MMO: Red 5's roster is dominated by ex-Blizzard staff, including members of the award-winning cinematics team, the lead exterior level designer for *WOW* and veterans of *WarCraft III* (top left), *StarCraft* (top middle) and *Diablo II* (top right), but also features a key member of the Xbox Live design team (middle left), alumni of *Pilotwings 64* (middle right), *Stranger's Wrath* (bottom left), *Uru* and *Rise Of Nations*, (bottom middle) as well as the designer of the Legend of the Five Rings collectible card game (bottom right)

continue in order to survive, so they immediately latched onto micropayments. So micropayments were popular with the game companies – I don't know if they're popular with gamers. If you call it a trend, it's really because it's something born out of publisher necessity and I'm still wondering how much of it is player momentum. That said I think there does exist a model for a micropayment-based MMO and I'm very intrigued in the way people are willing to pay for simply aesthetics, for example. I think it really just comes down to your style of games. You can create games that revolve around micropayments and you can create blockbuster games that can be subscribed by players to support things like live teams with lots of content update for free. And I think the type of experience will shape the business model that's appropriate for it.

Where do you stand on the debate of whether the in-game economy should connect to the external economy or not?

I haven't quite made up my mind. I look at collectable card games, where it's very much an economy that the guy who buys the best cards can compete at the highest levels, and other gamers complain about it, but Magic: The Gathering is still a phenomenally successful game. But there is a difference. In a game like Magic, many players in a friendly game will play a sealed deck – they won't buy any cards and they'll just open the deck in front of them and play it. And you don't have that option in MMOs currently, and that's the barrier.

So where is the most work still to be done in MMOs?

Well, I think that if improvements in graphics expand the audience by X, gameplay and immersive worlds expand it by Y, and when you think about the fact that an MMO is basically a huge supercomputer platform connected to millions of clients everywhere, you have a platform that can deliver a more engaging gameplay experience in terms of world simulation, AI, characters and emergent stories, and you can't compete with that in any one box. That's the real horizon in terms of MMOs.

Are you interested in releasing on consoles?

Well, we haven't announced platforms. Obviously, we're looking to launch on PCs, because the majority of game rooms in Asia are on PCs, but consoles are getting very interesting. They've solved the communication problems we talked about earlier, they have the market penetration. I think there are some challenges with the business model and how exactly that gets handled with platform holders, and there are some challenges to the game type. Not every MMO game is going to work well on a console, you have to come up with a game with the right user mechanics and interface that's going to appeal to both console on PC players. If we solve that, who knows where we'll be?

Are you intrigued by what home consoles with portable sister products, like Wii and DS, may bring to persistent online worlds where you may always want to have access?

Absolutely. MMOs aren't a game, they're a way of life, and having ways to stay connected to the game no matter where you are is going to be very important in the future. I think players demand it.

OUT THERE



EYE OF OBLIVION

The past few months have seen a spate of home-grown concoctions giving digital life to real-world architecture, whether it be simple deathmatch maps of American pundit parody The Colbert Report's studio, or artistically upward to a stunning *Half Life 2* recreation of Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater, but as with any trend that more closely connects real and imaginary worlds, we hope to see it continue. The latest group doing just that is University College London's Centre for Advanced Spatial Analysis, where Dr Andrew Hudson-Smith blogs (at digitalurban.blogspot.com) about the progress the group has been making modifying the highly-extensible RPG *Oblivion*. Their latest achievement: adding raw CAD data of the London Eye into the game's world, which they see as a step toward modelling the city of London. Though simply static for now, and not actually allowing a horseback ride to the pinnacle, there is something anachronistically sweet about seeing reality through Bethesda's eyes, even if Japan's Sandlot predated it by a year (not to mention let us shatter it into a million tiny pieces while on the hunt for a swarm of invading ants).



● http://digitalurban.blogspot.com/2006/09/london-eye-visualisation-in-oblivion.html



There's no indication yet of whether Red 5's MMO will bear any resemblance to *World Of WarCraft*; all that's currently announced is that the studio has licensed the Offset engine.



Playing Guitar Hero on the MTV

HMX has been bought by MTV – is it chart heaven or bad cover version hell?

The recent acquisition of Harmonix by MTV has left the music game crowd alternately shocked and thrilled. We caught up with creative director **Josh Randall** for his own thoughts on their major-label signing.

Was Harmonix in demand after *Guitar Hero*?
We started getting lots of phone calls from lots of pretty big companies, one after the other, saying: 'Hey, everyone here is addicted to your game: we should talk.' We initially started talking to MTV a year or two ago, just in terms of a partnership – their logo is in *GH* – we weren't thinking: 'Hey, they might buy us!'. Everyone here is excited – we got to meet a bunch of MTV guys yesterday, and they see us as the future of how people are going to want to experience their music, and want to be a part of that. The plan is for us to keep doing our thing: everyone here is staying, and we think it's a great opportunity to reach even more people.

Were you ready for accusations of selling out?
People don't know what it takes to make games, or what's really going on behind the scenes, and how being independent makes it *really* hard to make next-gen games. I knew I'd check the forums and find: 'Now they're just going to do Britney Spears games' – why would we do that? No one wants to mess with something that's working.

Like the *Amplitude* track-list kneejerk?
Yeah, exactly. *Frequency* had a lot of independent and underground bands, and we wanted to get an underground vibe – but honestly, if we could have afforded it, we would have gotten big bands too, so more people could get involved with the game.

> **"We started Guitar Hero as a punk rock game, with crazy sharp angles and ugly characters. People liked that, but now it's a question of do we make it friendly for everyone?"**

Do you see the MTV deal helping your relationship with recording labels?
I think a name like MTV is going to remove a lot of barriers. And bands that turned us down for *GH1* are coming back wanting to be in *GH2*. The music industry is so complex, there's so many people involved, and as an independent developer with limited resources you wind up getting only one channel to talk with these artists and their labels.

The press has referred to web production – will you be working outside of consoles?
That's a strange one. We first read that in the New York Times – I think that was a press person reading 'online gaming' and thinking that's the web. We're talking online gaming for next-gen consoles, just to clear that up. We're not going to be making funky websites any time soon [laughs].

Is there a sense that *GH* brought MTV to you, so the future is more *GH*?
We're definitely interested in doing more, because they're really fun, but we've got other stuff in the works. There is some added pressure now, as we have to keep up with the success of *Guitar Hero*, and then the other angle is to keep our original intentions. We started *Guitar Hero* as a punk rock game, with crazy sharp angles and sorta ugly characters. People liked that, but now it's a question of do we make it friendly for everyone, or try that same experimental aesthetic? It's a new factor, since when we'd never really had a hit before we'd just do what we wanted.

Do you think MTV will be suggesting what its audience will find palatable?
Since the deal isn't finalised yet, we haven't really had any meetings like that – I'm hoping that a lot of that stuff is going to be left up to us. The thing is, MTV isn't going to be our publisher: we're still going to be working with other publishers, so a lot of that direction will come from them.

Has the furore over *Lumines 2* and *Lumines Live*'s tracklists been sobering?
Games like that, or like *Frequency*, are just so hard to pick the songs for – *GH* is a rockin' guitar game, and that's the requirement. But for *Amplitude* I remember it being: 'We've got to have five per cent pop music, five per cent hip-hop...' You try to appeal to everyone, and sometimes it's not grounded enough in a particular culture to appeal to anyone. It's a risk, and if we did another game, maybe we'd limit the genre scope.

Can we take that as confirmation of *Freq 3*?
Oh my god, I would *love* to do that [laughs]. A lot of people here are psyched about it, and if the opportunity ever came up for us to do another, we would totally do it. Right now nothing's planned, but...





Harmonix' guiding principle has always been about using games to make music-making accessible to the masses. *Amplitude* (left) brought a modest number of converts, but it was *Guitar Hero* (right) that really built a following for the firm's approach to creative videogaming



MEDIA

Kenny gets pwned

MMORPGs land in South Park, with pretty sweet results





South Park has been very flattering to *WOW* indeed, with in-game graphics of a far higher standard than most players ever see

"Oh my God! He killed Kenny!" shouts Kyle in Make Love, Not WarCraft. In this new instalment of South Park the perpetrator is not a politician or paedophile, but a renegade player who has hacked the system to allow him to kill characters outside of duels. By obsessively playing the game 20 hours a day (and becoming overweight pariahs in the process), Cartman, Kyle, Stan and Kenny resolve to level up enough to beat the evil player. When two Blizzard executives arrive on the scene with a special weapon (the Sword of a Thousand Truths) to help the kids win, they let slip that they don't have *WOW* accounts of their own. "We have lives," they explain.

What at first seems like satirical ruthlessness actually turns out to be extremely smart marketing on the part of Blizzard. *WOW*'s creator not only endorsed the episode, but went so far as to render and animate machinima-style characters for in-game footage on the show. This year has seen the company receive the attentions of the mainstream media as well as specialist press: *WOW* has managed to make the news in 'quality' productions such as Newsnight and The International Herald Tribune. The game will also appear in ABC's gentle sitcom Help Me Help You.

Predictably, some hardcore elements in the wider *WOW* community have started a backlash by fastidiously pointing out factual inaccuracies in South Park's scripting and animation. Whether they're defenders of the faith or just simply reverting to type is up for debate.

Continue

Wii game boxes
Clean and crisp, with just the right amount of Wii

Beta tests
Never have there been happier lab rats

Live speak
There's nothing like a sung *TDU* match-up invite

Quit

PS3 game boxes
Two spines for the price of one isn't progress

DRM
Can someone fix it or abolish it – and fast

Team speak
Squeaking like a girl ruins your Tauren mystique

Author: J G Ballard
Publisher: 4th Estate
ISBN: 0 00 723246 2



KINGDOM COME

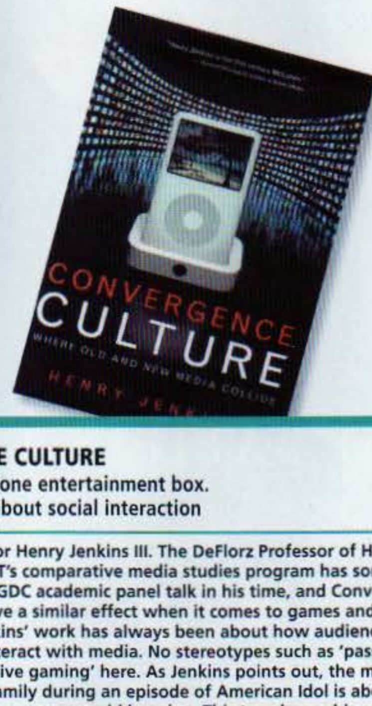
Ballard's latest acute vision places shopping as the spark for future apolitical revolution

With his name the basis of the dictionary definition for 'dystopian modernity,' it's little surprise J G Ballard's latest book is no laughing matter. But considering the strong autobiographical thread that runs through his oeuvre, the opening paragraphs get you wondering if the old man's finally lost his momentum. We're back, driving the motorways around Heathrow that characterised 1973's Crash, perhaps his enduring work of zeitgeist. But he's much too canny a player to be caged so easily by his back catalogue. Instead, Kingdom Come is an unsettling current vision of how the underlying spirit of nationalism can combust when mixed with our neo-consumerism.

It's all ambivalently packaged in the life of Richard Pearson, a 42-year-old who's just been sacked as an advertising executive by his ex-wife. But the crucial event for Pearson is the senseless gunning down of his father, a retired commercial pilot, in a suburban shopping mall.

Cut adrift from his posh Chelsea life, Pearson travels to the scene of the crime to try and figure out the cause. There, caught between the local establishment and the public that haunt the shopping centre, he finds himself becoming a willing activist in the sort of slow social revolution Ballard suggests underpins the wealthy, unsettled M4 corridor. And even if the denouement of the story is bumpy, Ballard's wider ability to dissect the currents of contemporary existence remains as sharp as ever.

Author: Henry Jenkins
Publisher: New York University Press
ISBN: 0 8147 4281 5



CONVERGENCE CULTURE

Forget the all-in-one entertainment box. Convergence is about social interaction

Thank goodness for Henry Jenkins III. The DeFlorz Professor of Humanities and director of MIT's comparative media studies program has sorted out many a wayward GDC academic panel talk in his time, and Convergence Culture should have a similar effect when it comes to games and other messy media. Jenkins' work has always been about how audiences experience and interact with media. No stereotypes such as 'passive TV watching' and 'active gaming' here. As Jenkins points out, the movement and activity of a family during an episode of American Idol is about as interactive a process as you could imagine. This too shapes his approach to that trickiest of terms, 'convergence'. Redefining it from the hardware-centric way it's generally used, Jenkins argues convergence of media happens in the brains of the audience and the social networks that result.

He builds on this with chapters looking at examples such as the spoiler groups who work to guess the winner of US show Survivor, the spectrum of intermedia products that was The Matrix and, perhaps most interestingly, the wider impact of the Harry Potter books in US culture. These range from a general boost to children's literacy, the rise of fan-created content and Warners' legal dilemma concerning them, through to the different ways Christian groups have dealt with the books' perceived occult content. His conclusion is that while content is powerful, the places your audience takes it are even more so.

INCOMING

New games, and updates on games already on the radar

Mushihime-sama Futari

FORMAT: ARCADE **PUBLISHER:** CAVE



Showcased at AMS 2006 and at an unsually lengthy location test in Akihabara's HEY arcade, Cave's sequel is taking its popularity as an excuse to toughen up. More cues, in fact, have been taken from the equally ruthless *Espgaluda II*, though the familiar bullet patterns at least lead to incomparably oversized boss encounters

Metal Slug Anthology

FORMAT: PSP **PUBLISHER:** IGNITION



The website URL suggests it to be the ultimate *Slug*, though who would put money on it really being the last? The 11th-hour addition of *Metal Slug 6* at least makes this a definitive history of the series' side-scrollers, though neither the 'full' widescreen support nor co-op modes have appeared so far in preview code

Far Cry Vengeance

FORMAT: Wii **PUBLISHER:** UBISOFT



How Ubisoft will map actions such as grenade tossing, feral swiping and balancing to the Wii Remote seems all too obvious, and sure to attract accusations of hammering square pegs into round holes (there'll probably be a minigame). Can this launch title be more than a novelty FPS over a year past its prime?

Phoenix Wright: Justice For All

FORMAT: DS **PUBLISHER:** CAPCOM



The so-called new features of *Gyakuten Saiban 2* reconvened are actually quite familiar, the game's investigation/trial structure and established events clearly stifling its capacity for innovation. Those decisive secrets and lies are now kept behind defendants' Psyche Locks, a life bar replacing the usual exclamation marks

Railfan

FORMAT: PS3 **PUBLISHER:** TAITO



Next stop on the line from *Densha De Go!* and *Train Simulator* is Ongakukan's assets-laden PS3 version, featuring enough high-definition photography and video to half-fill a Blu-ray disc. The result is pin sharp, with Chicago's elevated Brown Line joining Tokyo's Chuo and the Keihan-Outou between Kyoto and Osaka

Gyakuten Saiban 4

FORMAT: DS **PUBLISHER:** CAPCOM



Not an *Ace Attorney*-style remake, but an all new DS adventure. Hopes are high that its tailor-made cases will feature the same dual language support as the last two Japanese releases. New Ace Attorney Hosuke Odoroki, however, sounds like a man awaiting more dedicated localisation, much like his predecessor

Rainbow Six Vegas

FORMAT: 360, PS3 **PUBLISHER:** UBISOFT



The honeymoon's over, for now at least. Preview code that should be a Marketplace demo by the time **Edge** hits the shelves falls short of even the most cautious expectations. Set in the same construction site that informed last issue's preview, it's become a predictable and linear experience with clumsy scripted moments

Superman Returns

FORMAT: 360, PS2, PSP, XBOX **PUBLISHER:** EA



Perhaps the weight of life in Metropolis hasn't broken the back of EA Tiburon after all. Though Superman Survives might serve as a more relevant title now that the window of tie-in opportunity has been overshot, X06 at least showed a game meandering, if not flying, towards its intended bar of average sandbox heroism

Metal Gear Solid: Portable Ops

FORMAT: PSP **PUBLISHER:** KONAMI



No singleplayer mode on show at TGS, unfortunately, but enough polish and intuitiveness in the available deathmatches. Most of its charm seems to exist in quirky gametypes such as Capture The Frog and in a roll call of returning *MGS* characters to crawl about its trenches. Environmentally, however, it remains somewhat drab



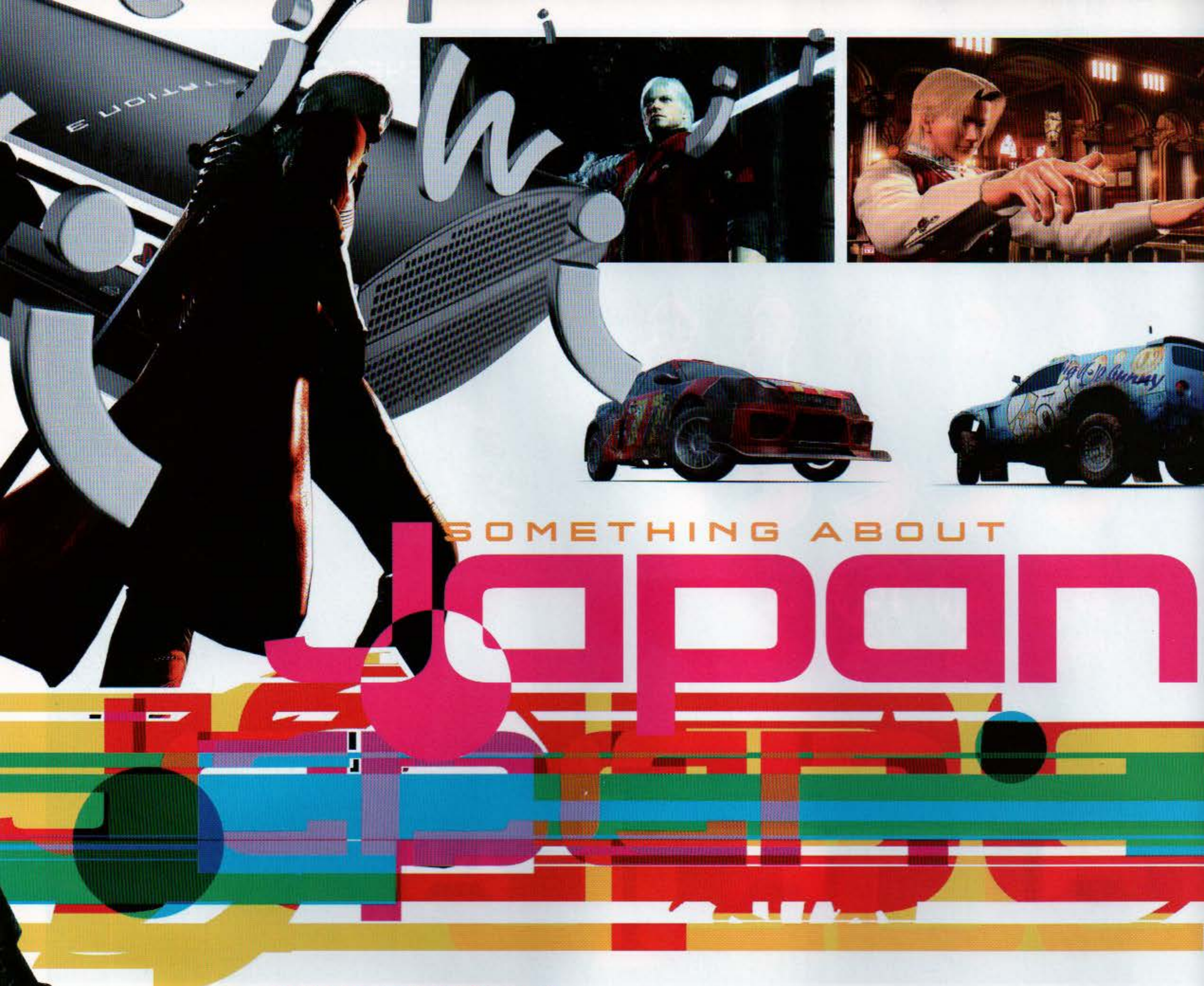
INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH

Gumboy: Crazy Adventures

www.gumboycrazyadventures.com/

For all the deafening cat-calls accusing *LocoRoco* of stealing entire chapters from *Gish*'s playbook despite their glaring and fundamental differences, there's no getting around the fact that *Gumboy* will undergo the same scrutiny and inevitable comparisons to both. But apart from the fact that you play as a ball which, as balls do, traverses levels by rolling, bouncing and collecting, it does do a fair amount to set itself apart.

Beneath its ugly-duckling visual design that calls to mind some of the surrealist naturalism of Samorost and vaguely unsettling charm of *Wik*, Czech developer Cinemax has created an at-times dark fairytale world that's as deeply physical to move through as either of the aforementioned games. Though the objectives are limited primarily to collecting, there's a sense of unpredictability and a sense of danger (Gumboy being a fair bit more fragile than similar heroes) that give it real challenge. Well-played lonesome-whistling sound design (discounting Gumboy's own disquieting utterances) and artful luminence in darker zones round off a very polished effort.



SOMETHING ABOUT Japan

PS3: east and west

Famitsu's Koji Aizawa on the international PS3 hype



At the beginning of October, I went to the London Games Summit – in part because I was invited by the UK embassy in Japan, but also just because I love to attend. Amongst the many events, one in particular caught my attention: Jamie Macdonald of SCE Worldwide Studios gave a Developing for a Network Experience keynote.

In essence, the speech was a primer in what to do in the face of skyrocketing development costs: small developers should seek support from larger companies and publishers; the standalone game business is coming to an end, so realign your focus on network play; keep staff numbers to a minimum and work with freelancers wherever possible. Perhaps the nuances of the message differed slightly, but you get the general gist. That this line comes straight from the horse's mouth in the form of SCE seems very unsettling and surprising, especially considering the imminent launch of the PS3. Maybe the time has indeed come for unprepared developers to drop out of the business, but in the context of a conference it seemed to offer little hope.

I still don't know anybody who's changed their mind about the PS3 after Kuturagi's keynote. But with only 100,000 units on offer at launch, it's still really hard to gauge whether there will be any left after day one

Leaving London on the Eurostar, I headed to Paris where I met with a few games industry insiders. Excitement around the Wii was very strong, though this is probably compacted by the delay of the PS3 in Europe. In development terms, the Wii is like an upgraded version of the GameCube, allowing programmers and designers to use well-known tools at very reasonable costs. Plus, the Wii controller is encouraging companies to create games in extremely creative ways.

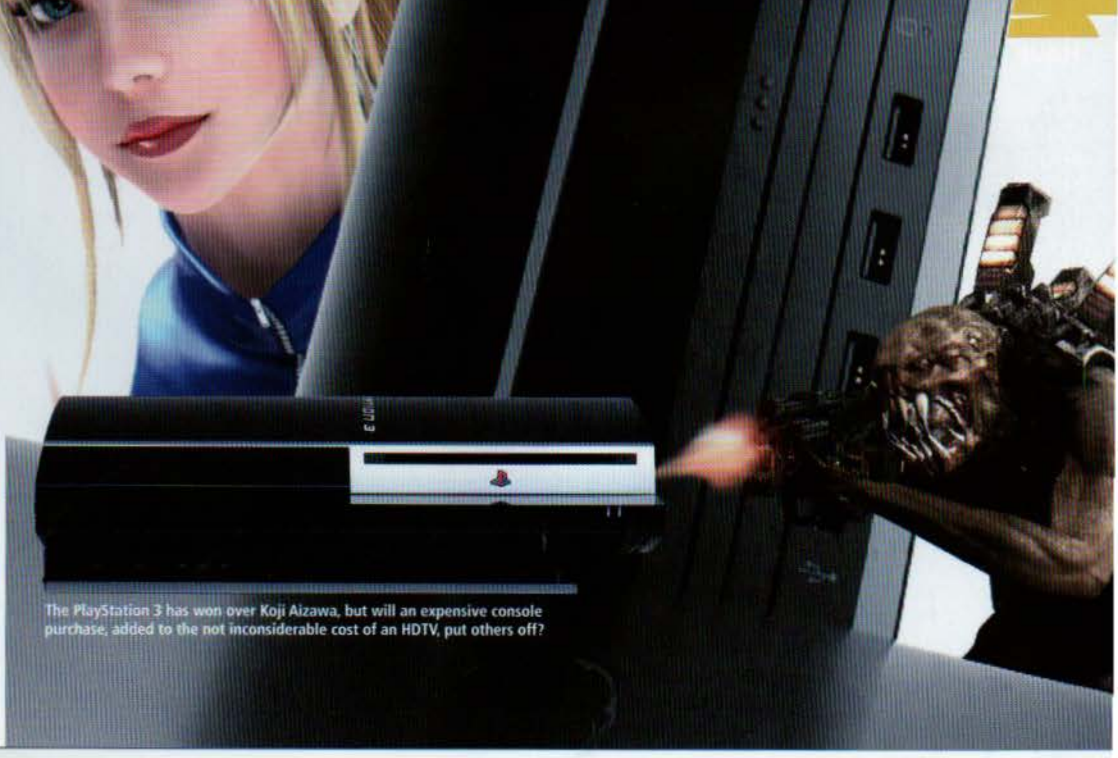
In the gaming world, at least, I have the feeling that the PS3 is generating a somewhat negative response in Europe. In Japan, however, it looks as though the platform is recovering. Obviously Ken Kuturagi's TGS announcement of a price drop has had a huge impact on the console's prospects. That the 20GB model will offer HDMI as standard for around ¥50,000 can only help matters. To be honest, I still don't know anybody who's changed their mind about the PS3 following





Kuturagi's keynote. But with only 100,000 units on the shelves at launch, it's still really hard to gauge whether or not there will be any left after day one.

TGS was literally packed with HD displays. *Virtua Fighter 5* was especially impressive. If gamers at the show didn't feel the need to immediately invest in an HDTV, I'm pretty sure they started to seriously think about it. While very popular titles like *FFXIII* and *MGS4* won't be out for a while, I was able to get some hands-on time with the likes of *Devil May Cry 4*, *MotorStorm* and *Resistance*. Playing these games convinced me that I may well end up with a PS3 myself, despite the expense. Of course, I need to get that massive 40-inch 1080p HD display first. Unfortunately, many Japanese live in tiny apartments reminiscent of rabbit hutches. Perhaps the only solution will be to move home!



The PlayStation 3 has won over Koji Aizawa, but will an expensive console purchase, added to the not inconsiderable cost of an HDTV, put others off?

Hype

The future of electronic entertainment

Boomerang controller

Did Sony's good old pad really come to PS3's rescue?



A thirdparty controller might well come along to add rumble to PS3's tilt, but it won't be able to go back and add the software to support it. The same goes for its FPS-unfriendly analogue sticks

The PS3 Play Beyond trailer aired at TGS was a classic. Classic Sony, that is. In it, an urban professional discovers – or rediscovers – the PlayStation pad stood bolt upright on the floor of a brutally cheerless apartment. It's still the complete iconographic package, recognisable in silhouette with face button symbols and a pre-Spider-Man insignia.

He moves to pick it up, and suddenly it's not a videogame interface but a skeleton key, pulling open the first of many doorways to distant, desolate lands. Once done, it shoots away like a cannonball, crashing through several brick walls before a rendezvous with the PS3 logo and its E3 slogan. It may be featherlight in reality, but here it's dark, dense, and indestructible.

The trailer begs a question: did Sony bring this controller back or is it actually powerless to keep it away? Despite efforts to move on with 2005's E3 prototype, a less-than-humble retreat saw that old bully of the peripheral playground welcomed back. And its image clearly hasn't changed – it's still the same old bruiser. At a time when reinvention lay at the heart of the competing brands, it does little to stifle suggestion of PS3's backwards mentality.

And to complicate matters, this month's Hype plays host to a row over the controller's own ability to keep up. On one side there's *Resistance: Fall Of Man*, an FPS which re-awakens the concerns over analogue precision we hoped had been laid to rest. But then there's *Lair*, a game that celebrates the pad's new tilt technology as a breakthrough in the same field.

The Play Beyond ad is a relic in this respect: it belongs to a time when Sony's pad was the pinnacle, capable of integrating whichever technology threatened to make it obsolete, and required to do nothing else but endure. It was, back then, indestructible. But the failure to accept that its sticks have been bettered, together with a spot of bother with some people called Immersion, has changed everything.

Clearly, it still has strengths (though it can't play a good game of *Frequency* any more), but its capacity for weakness is something Sony has to address. There's nothing to stop a flawed controller being replaced, but a reputation for interface inadequacy is something you can't upgrade.

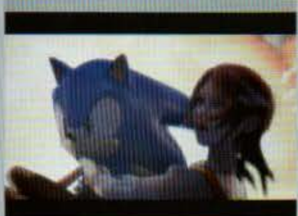
Edge's most wanted

Half Life 2: Episode 2



Valve has left enough loose ends to fund the most lucrative of pay-offs, though who's to say this won't be a meagre advance instead of the full amount? History – that's who
360, PC, PS3, VALVE/EA

Sonic The Hedgehog



It remains highly questionable, but at least it seems like the *Sonic* franchise is evolving beyond the realms of simply advertising the wares of the awful cartoon.
360, PS3, SEGA

Metal Gear Solid 4



Kojima's two-year tease is slowly creeping up on us. In under 12 months we'll get to see how the new trailer's impossible camera angles compare to the real thing.
PS3, KONAMI







Ground troops are far from defenceless, even when you're raining fire on them. Catapults and other weapons will punish you until you swoop by and launch their owners into oblivion







FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SCEE**
DEVELOPER: **FACTOR 5**
ORIGIN: **USA**
RELEASE: **2007**

Lair

Its tilt controls rock, but will clumsy combat burn its claws?

How often is the perfect interface included in the box? In the case of most simulation genres, where a complimentary steering wheel or flight stick still begs for pedals or a throttle lever, never. Not that *Lair* is a classic simulation, but it does place that same challenge of indirect control in your hands. More to the point, in PS3's unproven controller it's found the unlikeliest of perfect interfaces, and one that everyone who plays it can enjoy.

Opening with a telltale tutorial – a dry run through immense floating hoops – *Lair* makes one thing immediately clear: you are not a dragon. As with *Shadow Of The Colossus*' Agro, there's a point of disconnection between your mount – in this case a truly glorious juggernaut of airborne muscle – and you, the hulking suit of armour in its saddle, betrayed as human by a narrow glimpse of eyes and surrounding skin. Gentle turns suggest precise, absolute control, but urgent twists add a layer of resistance – a split-second test of your authority over ten tonnes of reptile. Say what you like about Sony's decision to adopt it, but this feels like a game that tilt was made to control.



One of the tests to determine *Lair*'s superiority over *Rogue Squadron* will be the bond that develops with your ride. The visuals and interface have given it a head start, but turning airborne flamethrower into magnificent beast will take more

Factor 5 president **Julian Eggebrecht** agrees, though not when we suggest mastery of these reins to be part of the game's difficulty curve. "I don't believe in complex interfaces," he declares. "I'm impatient and a firm believer in instant gratification, though I want depth layered on top. By assigning moves to gestures with the motion controller, we simplified the multi-button interface. If you slam it down, you dash forward; if you pull it towards you, the dragon does a 180. On the ground, you do tail-slams by using the gesture recognition, and even in mid-air combat you can dodge and attack with it. It all helps to achieve a visceral level that otherwise isn't possible."

> Gentle turns suggest precise, absolute control, but urgent twists add a layer of resistance – a split-second test of your authority over ten tonnes of reptile

A limited demo at TGS featured a technically outstanding world, rendered in realtime to its most precipitous cliffs and sunken valley floors, but its action was confined to a single fortified bridge. Which begs the question: where exactly will the *Lair* experience exist between those two extremes? Will it be long or short? Action, adventure, or something else? Or, as Eggebrecht claims, will it be the whole lot? "It's not your MMORPG, but then it's also much more involved and evolved than *Rogue Leader* was five years ago. The strategic element we've wanted in our games for a long time is finally possible because Cell can simulate two full armies at war while at the





Your warrior character can dismount when landed, but Eggebrecht denies any associated hack-and-slash. "You will be able to dismount and mount in certain areas, but we won't let you explore and battle on-foot just yet"







Execution moves usually see one rider forcibly dismount another, often adopting a new dragon in the process. The process is automated and often involves a swift whack with a mace, but sometimes brings more spectacular weapons to bear

same time involving the player in intricate one-on-one battles. It's suddenly a living and breathing world, sometimes shorter, sometimes longer in its individual missions."

Not a *Rogue Squadron* redux, then, but not entirely divorced. "We are using all of the experience we gained in that genre of flight and projectile combat," he admits. "But in a more general sense, *Lair* is using lessons learned from everything we've done in the past, going all the way back to the *Turrican* games. Since it's possible to go seamlessly from air to ground, the design of levels is much more complicated. Plus, even for the basic flight, since *Lair's* creatures are fully physics-based and the motion control is used to the full, it's a very different beast to an X-Wing controlled with a stick."

Aerial combat corroborates this, though seldom to the greatest effect. A shoulder button holds your course towards a locked target, with long-range fireballs mapped to the face buttons, while close proximity invites a dragon-upon-dragon attack. Believable thrusts of the pad towards your target result in close quarters swoops, and button combos then engage tooth and claw. After what presently feels like a rather mindless mash, a series of peripheral vision pulses act as QTE prompts, with further correctly-timed thrusts triggering stages of an elaborate execution.

Here's where *Lair* has us most concerned, because it forces you to draw a line between interface and control scheme. A very natural process of flight makes way for one of gaming's most robotic combat procedures, and there's almost no chance in the TGS build of you fluffing it up, the challenge instead to be found in target tracking and raising hell down below. Collision with a horizontally flat surface is enough for your dragon to touch down, the tilt controls flattening to a 2D plane and directing its charge. With jets of flame and melee swipes, you can directly influence the tide of battle.

"We're balancing it with a morale meter display," says Eggebrecht. "By constantly telling the player what the morale of his troops is he can choose when to break away from one-on-one scenarios and enter other parts of the battle. That's one of the fun and very non-linear evolutions that the PS3 makes possible – a world that's even more frenzied and chaotic than in our past efforts, but at the same time one that provides the player with more control than before."

Lair's abundance of events, together with the agony of seeing its superb interface clash with its close quarters combat, makes you wonder if those rigid and troublesome mid-air moments are actually necessary at all. Interestingly, Eggebrecht describes its furious, multi-faceted action as a plate-spinning act. But where that implies a fleeting touch, which would entirely suit the elegant lethality of these warring dragons, the game spends much of its demo in a ham-fisted brawl.

The X factor

Though *Lair* is the second technical showcase given by Factor 5 to a console launch, the first being GameCube's *Rogue Leader*, the studio has offered a wealth of additional advice to manufacturers. So who typically approaches who? "That's not an easy answer, because it's not an easy process," says Eggebrecht. "Just as we followed hardware development back in the PS2, Xbox and GameCube days, we did the same with this generational jump and talked to all three of the big ones. In terms of game titles rather than just engine-work, there was a certain amount of power needed for a game like *Lair*, and motion control has been on our mind for many years, so the PS3 was the perfect platform. We showed the concept to Sony, they loved it, and off we went."





The jagged edges seen in the too-brief TGS demo, which is topped and tailed in a way that suggests public release, may have been exacerbated by the 1080p TV sets used exclusively on Sony's stand. *DMC4* actually runs at 720p



FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2007**

Devil May Cry 4

Slashing the chances of an unholy mess, the new leading man ascends to HD



Heat exchange

Bringing DMC4's trailer to a terrific peak but its demo to a teasing end, the game's first boss battle is up there – all the way up there – with the series' best. Putting to rest any doubts over PS3's ability to render fire, the demon Variel is also sure to put the game's solid framerate to the test. Not just the size of a house, he is also capable of setting that house on fire by simply walking past it and he's unlikely to calm fears (or indeed stifle joy) over *DMC4*'s claims of being the hardest instalment yet. As you'd expect, overcoming him involves a combination of deductive logic and keen reflexes, his attacks growing more diverse and furious as his health declines.

As well as being *Devil May Cry*'s signature, nimbleness is also its lifeline. A tightrope walk – a tightrope *dance*, even – between action and melodrama, momentum and distraction, the series tweaks its formula with every episode, doing so at its peril. *DMC4* is the most dangerous yet, just one of many changes having removed Dante, the icon, from both his place on the game's cover and his leading role. Though he remains pivotal to its events, notably older yet stubbornly kinetic, it's unknown to what degree his allegiances will shift in this story, set immediately after the first game's but long before the second's.

Centre stage now belongs to Nero – no son of Sparda but still a fresh-faced Dante lookalike, with added similarities to *DMC3*'s Vergil. Rumours naturally abound as to the nature of their relationship, even going as far as to suggest the latter as part demonic possessor of the new hero, but producer Hiroyuki Kobayashi is keenly playing down such narrative significance. As ever, it's probably best to take both fan theories and Capcom deflections with equal amounts of salt; Nero's moves, after all, are more important than his looks. With a new sword-cum-sidearm, the Red Queen, joining his dual pistols and stratospheric leaps, he's more than just a pretty face – something the game generally aspires to be.



A new army of marionette freaks waits to be beaten from pillar to post, drafted by *Breath Of Fire* artist Tatsuya Yoshikawa. Early examples have scythe legs that spark off the ground before lurching into flashing roundhouses

Reinforcing the notion that consistent anti-aliasing will be the single most important breakthrough in console game aesthetics – if there's no such notion, then consider one proposed – *DMC4* is currently a jagged edge away from looking sensational. Baroque to near-absurdity but never to a fault, it stands to be one of PS3's most flattering first-generation titles, self-shadowed and holding firm at 60 frames per second. That's not so much a change, however, as a logical step forwards – the kind that Capcom famously takes in its stride. Where Kobayashi and director Hideaki Itsuno have a real fight on their hands is in avoiding accusations of a predominantly visual upgrade by raising the series' combative game.





Nero's glum cynicism reflects a general downturn in *DMC* spirits, his role slaying demons unable to keep his own at bay, or lift the shadow from the game's environments

DMC4 has controversially ditched its predecessor's style system, with another of this month's Capcom fighters lending it a surprising replacement: not just a hand, but a God Hand. Though it can't conjure up that game's roulette wheel of fireballs and kicks to the balls, Nero's demon limb can grapple distant enemies mid-combo to bring them within range of his sword, or alternatively throw them away or to the floor.

Threading together A-rank combos has suddenly become simpler, or at least that's how it seems in the TGS demo. But if we had to make a call regarding whether or not this disruption of balance would persist, we'd suggest not. Even in the most crowded chambers, it's still possible to earn everything down to a D rank for particularly uninspired strings, and a mere tweak here and there could easily put *DMC*'s players back in their place at its feet.



DMC4 isn't as direct a visual descendant as *Dead Rising*, but a clear overlap remains between this Capcom generation and the last, even if the special effects are now superior





Outland – a shattered, vaguely sci-fi-inflected world due to be opened in a major world event – has lush sunshine and melancholy beauty surpassing anything currently in the game, as well as the expected lurid crags







Sunstrider Isle, home of the Blood Elves, could well be the prettiest zone in the whole world; an autumnal, wooded paradise, it's a world away from the hardscrabble rural areas most of the Horde races start in

World Of WarCraft: The Burning Crusade

Blizzard's substantial revision of its MMO phenomenon is more than just two pretty faces

The term 'expansion' doesn't really do justice to *The Burning Crusade*, which is shaping up to be much more than a mere vertical extension to *World Of WarCraft*. It's more of a cultural revolution: besides the raised level cap, new continent, new dungeons, new profession and two new races, it will be an agent of trickledown change even for those who don't buy it. And all signs point to a change for the better.

The most dramatic shift will be in player-versus-player combat, with a brave and complete eradication of the ranking system – gear being doled out in a straight exchange for honour points. Combined with the new inter-server and intra-faction arena fighting for teams of two to five – complete with matchmaking system and seasonal events – the aim is to eliminate the punishing grind to the top of the PvP tree, and replace it with genuine, competitive, global sport. Fans of massed combat will be rewarded with battles for control of neutral towns – and their quests and vendors – in the new continent of Outland.

WOW's most serious problem has been the narrowing of players' options come the endgame, with the primacy of raid dungeons ostracising casual players and smaller guilds, and homogenising the talent builds and equipment of those who do take part. Almost every aspect of *The Burning Crusade* works against that: more viable diversification in the extended talent trees; the new jewelcrafting profession and attendant customisable, socketed items; the reduction of the player cap on new raid dungeons from 40 to 25. The winged design of most new dungeons is particularly democratic: typically they'll feature three five-man sections pitched at different level ranges between 60 and 70, and a fourth level 70 raid wing. In addition, all five-man wings can be set to a hard, top-level difficulty setting, with loot scaling to match, offering a genuine alternative to raids for smaller dungeon teams. Across the board, demands on time and organisation are being reduced, and it's being made easier for more people to see more of the game.

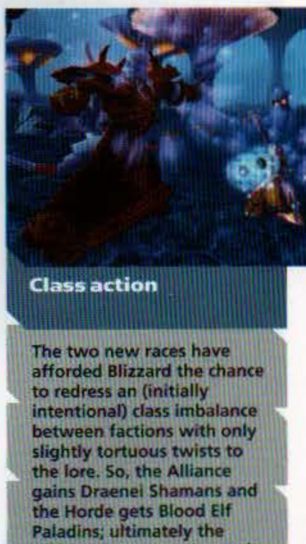
For all this tinkering, Blizzard has not forgotten its primary role as ringmaster. Its flair for showmanship will probably be expressed most flamboyantly in the new instances, but the flying mounts are attention-grabbing to say the least. Outland is visually stunning and, well, outlandish, and the two new races are as charismatic as any in the game. The preening Blood Elves and mystical Draenei may have a rather bumpy landing in the lore, but it's cushioned by extravagantly beautiful new starting areas covering the first 20 levels, new home cities, attractive mounts – the Elekk and Cockatrice – and even new quests to take them through the old zones between levels 20 and 60.

On paper, it's hard to see where Blizzard has put a foot wrong, but in practice, such profound change – to PvP, loot, raiding, maths, everything – throws up a forest of balancing issues that are still being resolved. There's bound to be a painful transitional period for some players, maybe even most. But there's no doubt that this crusade is a righteous one.



The Draenei, originally from Outland, have crashed on Azeroth in an inter-dimensional fortress that becomes their home town. It's located on an island off Kalimdor, near the Night Elves' similarly remote starting area

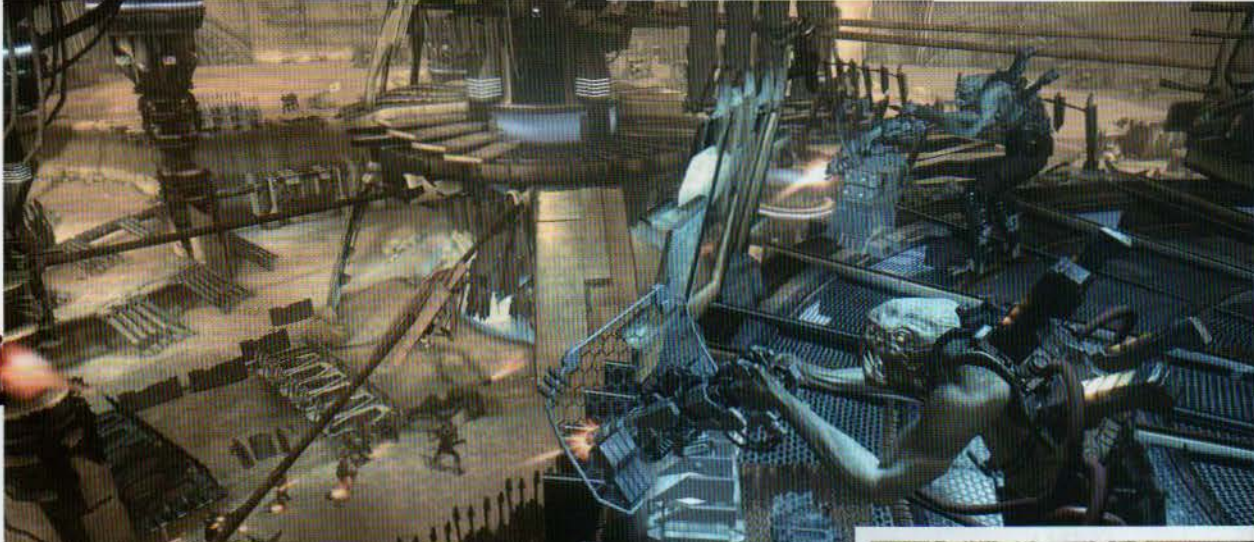
FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **VIVENDI UNIVERSAL GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **BLIZZARD**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **TBC**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E157, E164**



Class action

The two new races have afforded Blizzard the chance to redress an (initially intentional) class imbalance between factions with only slightly tortuous twists to the lore. So, the Alliance gains Draenei Shamans and the Horde gets Blood Elf Paladins; ultimately the differentiator wasn't worth the jealousy, or the endless debates on their relative worth. Whether the new spells and talent-tree revamps will succeed in clarifying the roles of these two controversial hybrid classes isn't quite so clear, although the revision of the Paladin – the only class to get new, fundamental skills below level 60 – should succeed in making this holy warrior an effective secondary tank.





FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SCEE**
DEVELOPER: **INSOMNIAC**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER 11 (JAPAN), NOVEMBER 17 (US)**

Resistance: Fall Of Man

Can the biggest game in history really be this shallow?

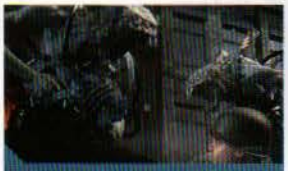
The likes of *Black* and *Timesplitters* might have previously wrestled some form of obedience out of the notorious DualShock analogue sticks, but the weightless *Resistance: Fall Of Man* lacks either game's authority. At TGS, in a build of presumably near-final quality, that's where its problems *began*, with a PS3 controller that still feels like poison to the FPS.

This early in PS3's game, no one's asking Insomniac's frenetic shooter to be stunning – just different. After so long in the doldrums, Sony just needs to prove that its machine is *able* to take back the FPS, if not necessarily poised. But *Resistance*, a supposedly harrowing slaughterhouse of real-world physics, keen to prove that aliens in 1950s Britain are a more troubling and exhilarating prospect than Germans in 1940s France, feels all too familiar. In its current form, it could actually be the last thing Sony needs: a predictable slog, with PS2 written all over it.

As you butt into its surfaces and characters with wild analogue thrusts, the game's world not only moves like that of a PS2 shooter before the eyes, but buckles further beneath the weight of expectation. Irrespective of who's been dropping the bombs, its blitzed streets and suburbs are commonly apocalyptic, with furniture such as buses, telephone boxes, bricks and window frames pummelled into stray piles. There's no suggestion of the cold and precise intellect that built City 17, nor that the barricaded shells of houses were ever actually homes. All it's taken to build this universe is gunpowder, which wouldn't be a problem were there better guns to use it in.

Criticism of the game's weapons seems unfair when you consider the effort behind their construction, and almost unfathomable if you consider *Ratchet & Clank*. But maybe it's the lack of rumble support, the overly buoyant controls and the comparative lack of movement in this world that costs them their impact. The current application of a supposedly sophisticated physics engine dwells too much on details and never on the whole, with car doors flapping about and dirt conjured around grenade blasts, but little damage that's worthy of your fire. *Resistance* at times feels like a theme park adventure, full of rigid props and smoke machines.

In what sounds like a sci-fi plot twist, a black hole seems to be sucking all the energy out of Insomniac's shooter. Either that or the four-level demo at TGS, kept to a one-per-session limit by unskippable, text-heavy cutscenes, simply failed to make its point. This is the 22GB poster child of Blu-ray, yet it's hard to appreciate the detail. Its weapons are made for strategic play, yet when you're carrying them all at once it's hard to care. Its Chimeran enemies are cunning and cruel, yet demonstrate little of the AI that Cell is supposed to empower. So we're crossing our fingers with a heavy heart, waiting for proof of how little we actually know.



The world at war

Incorporating but not limited to the cover-penetrating Auger, the homing bullets of the Bullseye, the explosive gunk of the Sapper and the storm of nails unleashed by the Hedgehog grenade, *Resistance*'s arsenal should at the very least be good for something – its multiplayer. Aiming to bring 40 players together via PS3's mysterious online service, the build at TGS held a good framerate with no appreciable lag (granted this was over a LAN). Though the open level designs we encountered sometimes seemed a little flat, the clutter of their skies and soundscapes gave a great sense of peripheral action. If the servers can be filled, which with advanced matchmaking and reward systems seems entirely likely, that atmosphere should be carried through.







The three-day period in which Sgt Nathan Hale endures the game's events sees a British landscape steadily being cocooned by Chimera barricades and facilities. What the aliens introduce, however, the humans can also exploit





Finer senses of gravity, pace, control and consequence are all that stands between the TGS demo and the blitzkrieg that screenshots suggest, but *Resistance* seems set on its direction, and short of time in which to master its platform's unweighted controller



Those who found *Oblivion*'s sight-seeing beguiling are likely to spend a lot of time in Bright Falls simply hiking in the hills. The setting's naturalism means it's fairly unvaried, but it's never less than breathtaking





Alan Wake

Light finally dawns on Remedy's mysterious adventure

Bright Falls is a place of uncertainty, where the line between waking and dreaming, shocking and dreaded, real and imagined is too fine to trace. We know this because a car has just fallen out of the sky and landed at the feet of an amazed developer. "Umm," he says, looking round the wreckage of a tornado-ravaged truck-stop. "Let's go back to town."

The idea of *Alan Wake*'s world having airborne cars and explosive environments is particularly shocking, because since its debut at E3 2005 it's been deserted and dormant, giving nothing away about the intentions of the game beyond its troubled hero and his icily beautiful holiday spot. Developers Remedy, previously known for their *Max Payne* games, executed a daringly simple publicity campaign of refusing to tell anyone anything about the game, which did nothing to slow the flow of 'Best Of E3' rosettes awarded on the basis of some nice mountains and a lonely-looking man in a scarf. But now Bright Falls has come to life, and the nature of Wake's role – above and beyond having to be believably heroic with a name like Alan – has become clear.



From the demo, the thirdperson combat looked a little clumsy and vague, but it seems clear that Wake was never supposed to be an accomplished marksman, instead firing only when fear and desperation become overwhelming

Remedy bills the game as a psychological action thriller, but in many respects it might be better described as a new direction for the adventure genre. Alan, troubled horror writer, recently bereaved and plagued by insomnia, is in Bright Falls for a rest cure, but is finding instead that the nightmares that inspired his best-seller have come for their cut. And so the old adventure tropes of triggering cutscenes with the locals, and travelling from A to B and back, become mixed with modern action basics: that adventure game commuting can now take the form of hiking into the imposingly bleak mountains, or cruising along the roads which snake through them. And, when the darkness does catch up with him, Wake can rely on his gun rather than a QTE. All the next-gen boxes are ticked – the dynamic day/night cycle is layered with a truly astonishing weather system, and the physics are flexible enough to let a tornado tear a soaring, bruising gash through buildings, car parks and rubbish tips, before scattering the fragments in gentle, deadly arcs as it departs.

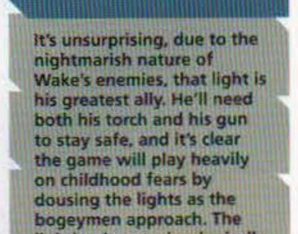
But the core adventure game challenge remains. Can Remedy deliver a story which satisfies, particularly when it's aiming at the psychological (which games can struggle with) and the horrifying (a genre in which cheesy is a much more likely outcome than classy)? If it can, then it may lay an entire genre's demons to rest along with Alan Wake's.



The tornado is a fantastic physics set-piece, tearing the roofs from shacks, scooping cars and loose debris skyward, and tugging determinedly at the corners of heavier objects until something else bangs into them, propelling them into the air

FORMAT: **360, PC**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT**
DEVELOPER: **REMEDY**
ORIGIN: **FINLAND**
RELEASE: **TBA**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E164**





Dawn of the dead

It's unsurprising, due to the nightmarish nature of Wake's enemies, that light is his greatest ally. He'll need both his torch and his gun to stay safe, and it's clear the game will play heavily on childhood fears by dousing the lights as the bogeymen approach. The lighting is as technologically sound as the physics and weather, volumetrically flowing through window-panes and wall-cracks. The suggestion of the X06 demo is that Wake's nemesis can take the form of Dark Alan, providing an embodied target for the gunplay, and a focus for the cinematic set-ups.





Graphically, the game doesn't disappoint. Models and textures do real justice to the various craft, as evidenced by this Borg encounter. The backgrounds also do a good job of alleviating the samey-ness of being in space







No doubt the beautiful, slowly dawning planetary panoramas are supposed to accuratly reflect what travelling through space is actually like. In actuality it can drag on a bit, even when going at full warp speed

FORMAT: **360, PC**
PUBLISHER: **BETHESDA**
DEVELOPER: **MAD DOC**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER 7 (US) TBC (UK)**



Bethesda boldly goes

Publisher Bethesda's new role as flame-bearer of the Star Trek gaming universe will reveal itself as either blessing or curse depending on the ability to merge accessibility with the desires of the fanbase – preaching to the converted can be far more daunting than finding converts. Expectations are so incredibly high that they can only result in ecstatic jubilation or crushing disappointment. Hopefully, the games will evolve by listening to the fervent Star Trek community.

Star Trek: Legacy

Can a literal next generation Star Trek game seek out new life?

Star Trek games thrive on captive audiences. So if you're more concerned with, say, the maintenance of esoteric Enterprise mythology than solidly enjoyable gameplay, there's nothing in the underlying structure of *Star Trek: Legacy* to suggest that you won't be enthralled. If, though, Star Trek is more of an occasional guilty pleasure than absolute lifelong obsession, the Trekking on offer here is likely to leave you a little bit lost in space. Rather than being a problem with design or execution, *Legacy's* shortcomings have to do with how finely attuned the game is to its niche (though large) target demographic.

Its major draw is that it manages to encompass the whole of the franchise to date. Moreover, Bethesda has managed to pull off a pretty amazing coup by convincing all principal captain actors (Shatner, Stewart, Brooks, Mulgrew, Bakula) to perform voice acting duties. As a fleet admiral (not necessarily Starfleet – Klingon, Romulan and Borg vessels are all playable) your aim is to strategically position your ships to be able to take tactical advantage of your own militaristic impulses. Federation admirals, pacifist humanitarians to the very last, will attempt protectionist, defensive manoeuvres whilst other races square up to each other in territorial skirmishes. Since the game spans the entire Star Trek, legacy, allegiances can change depending on the amount of time passing between generations. Unfortunately, on early preview code at least, controls are irritatingly cumbersome. Action occurs incredibly slowly, and you could probably get through an episode of the show by the time anything significant happens. Investing time in the game just doesn't pay off quickly enough, and although later levels promise far more action, actually having to get to them seems like too much of a struggle. Ardent fans may disagree.

Why Star Trek has never truly established itself as a gaming franchise in the manner of Star Wars remains something of an enigma. Perhaps it's that the mixture of wordiness and socio-political commentary integral to the show will never translate properly to play. Perhaps it's that the thoughtful rigidity of Trek-style combat isn't satisfying enough for a place in interactive media. Or, perhaps, it's that the developers themselves are such Trekker purists that they can't bring themselves to experiment with its format.

Whatever it is, there's a wealth of material Star Trek games seem determined to exclude. Think of how often Kirk's interspecies flirting ends in brawling fisticuffs, or how many times a planet-bound shuttle fails on entry, spiralling fearfully out of control. Wouldn't a *Sim City*-style *Starfleet Command* provide the click-heavy RTS framework Star Trek was made for? The FPS dynamic of the *Elite Force* games probably came closest to successfully bringing gaming and Star Trek together, but even this was essentially a pre-built game around which Star Trek was the loose hook.

So is *Legacy* going to buck the trend and find a way to appeal beyond its niche? It seems likely not, and is perhaps the wiser for it: pleasing its own population before braving new, mass-market worlds.

A Live multiplayer mode is included. Although you will be able to face off against online opponents, play seems to be skewed towards statistical comparison rather than direct combat



FORMAT: **PS2, PSP, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **LUCASARTS/ATARI**
DEVELOPER: **FRONTIER**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **Q4 2006**

Thrillville

After Lego Star Wars, LucasArts expands its infant-baiting empire with a foray into theme parks



This isn't, unfortunately, an exciting boss battle but one of the many park automations dotted around purely for decorative effect. Small details and a realistic depth of field ratio add to the overall feel of your own theme park



Arcane arcade

What most prominently prevents *Thrillville* from being dismissed as an infantile last-gen swansong is the extent to which it pays its dues to game culture and history. By knowingly referencing games as diverse as *Halo*, *Onimusha* and *R-Type*, *Thrillville* offers a Masonic handshake to gamers who might otherwise overlook its charm. And any game that makes the arcade the most exhilarating feature of a park has to be worth its weight in inserted coins.



Back in the day, everything from murdering naked innocents (*Rampage*) to initiating incestuous affairs (*Kissin Kousins*) was par for the course for young gamers and no one batted an eyelid. Alas, times have changed. These days children must feel like castigated tabloid targets just for seeking to do something as comparatively pedestrian as repeatedly driving over a virtual prostitute or policeman.

The fact that many children hanker after adult-oriented games goes some way to highlighting how poorly their own gaming needs have been satisfied. *Thrillville* is attempting to bridge the gap between games currently designed for kids and the certificated games they wish they could own. Pre-release, it seems likely to succeed.

Feistily feel-good from the very off, *Thrillville* sets out to sweep players away with its gleefully colourful array of attractions, shops, punters and minigames. Helped along by the presence of a jaunty MOR soundtrack, you're instantly made to feel as though everything in the metaphorical sweetshop is yours for the taking.

Park management is the name of the game, though 'manager' is perhaps too forceful a word to describe the gentle caretaker you actually become. Tasks range from cleaning up the chunky yellow vomit of your perpetually nauseous customers to Bemani-style dance challenges. Maintaining the park itself is one thing, but you'll also have to cater to the needs of your clientele. If they're bored by your looping, whirling attractions they'll voice their complaints and restrict your progress. Everything from the smallest burger stall to the largest coaster is customisable to some extent, so only carelessness is to blame if your private wonderland is a dud.





The game's missions are simplistic errands, and the rewards for progress seem either disproportionately high or overwhelmingly accessible depending on your age



Race tracks and mini golf courses provide welcome diversions, though it's the arcade style minigames that really make their mark (see 'Arcane arcade'). The FPS sublevels play like pre-teen primers on the fundamentals of the genre, whilst micro-2D shooters provide a modicum of difficulty not to be found elsewhere in the game. Genuinely addictive and surprisingly accurate, many of these offer co-op and versus modes to heighten the level of authenticity.

Rollercoaster and ride simulation is physically solid: you'd expect no less from the developers of the *Rollercoaster Tycoon* series. After the blissful abandonment of the minigames, however, actually riding the machines seems a tad anticlimactic. Building them is far more fun. Get carried away and your intertwining, serpentine machines soon resemble giant metal postmodern sculptures.

Elsewhere, the fact that all of *Thrillville*'s 1,000 or so NPCs are completely unique and interactive is technically remarkable. Sadly, this ambitious feat also undermines playability thanks to the repetitive stock roster of comments and responses provided. It's an irritating disparity, tainting an otherwise enjoyable experience with a draining exercise in robotised monotony.

Still, in an industry determined to feed kids insipidly execrable iterations of existing popular franchises, *Thrillville* marks out its own territory as a singularly heartfelt and well-crafted proposition.





Although character and environment modelling is somewhat flat-faced, it's key to remember that this game doesn't have the least interest in photorealism, relying instead on charm, charisma, and carefully applied visual effects. Animated Pixar-style art direction also appropriately bookends the game

FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **BANDAI NAMCO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER 11 (JAPAN), NOVEMBER 17 (US)**

Ridge Racer 7

A brave new world awaits the superstar of console starting grids, and we don't mean PS3





Dead skies and roads must rank as the most unflattering of teasers, making the latest batch a baffling one. Textur quality continues to creep up, but *Ridge* is no *PGR3*, and would gain little from such a cold eye for detail



Intercontinental drift

In its bid to turn a linear tour into an enduring career, *RR6* created a dense matrix of races and tournaments – the World Explorer mode – to keep players busy. *RR7* has a new tactic: to make its world malleable so that players feel empowered. Enough customisable performance parts and visual upgrades have been made available for an estimated 375,000 combinations, all of which can be driven online. A greater effort has also been made to reflect player achievements on the global stage, with rankings not only recognising the cream of the crop, but singling out a single dominant player to be *the* Ridge Racer. Precisely what he'll have to do to get there is unknown.









Still to lock down that required framerate, the TGS demo bore telltale signs of last-minute optimisations. The stripe kits and decals of its vehicles were visibly compressed, jarring on the starting grid with the pristine landscapes



Getting people to look forward to *Ridge Racer 7* means getting them to look in just the one direction, which is easier said than done thanks to recent series trends. What was once a one-way street of overlapping upgrades has become a conduit through *Ridge* space and time – an array of content and technologies so diverse that having age-old classics like *Rally-X* in the mix barely seems unusual. *Ridge Racer 6* made measured progress; *Ridge Racer* emulation on PSP proposes commemoration; *Ridge Racers* blurs the line between the two. Together, they've got us in a 720-degree spin which this latest game has to correct.

Its solution is to take us beyond the crash barriers of Ridge City to somewhere substantially new, giving us space to readjust. *RR7* will visit several new environments where scenery is as likely to include Asian rainforest canopies and temples as it is palm trees and highrises. Like last year's 360 game, *RR7* is taking the series ethic to a continental stage with its Ridge State Grand-Prix, while its infrastructure is going further with an online hub (see 'Intercontinental drift'). It's as worrying a development as it is sensible: on one hand, you have a perfect venue for making a fresh start; on the other, a suggestion that Ridge City has become so overburdened with roads and beauty spots that it's finally spilling over, losing control.

But as far as Bandai Namco's concerned, we shouldn't care – if there can be a Ridge City, then why not a Ridge nation? If the new locations prove worthy of the name, then why shouldn't its borders expand? At TGS, though this still felt like a game out on a limb, that positivism was contagious. Reassurances of *Ridge* inheritance were splashed across tunnel walls that would bounce but never snag your car, and a clutch of landmarks vied with the racing line for your attention. Brakelight trails left a signature of every drift, and even the highest leaps from the track would always hammer you back down to Earth. In a further bid for validation, the demo suggested its Lost Ruins and Shadow Caves tracks to be parts of the world where the sun shines brighter, the HDR effects richer, than *Ridge* has ever known.

The game earned itself a reputation in Tokyo for being one of few PS3 games running at a full 1080p, and at 60 frames per second its grace as bankable as ever. But that isn't entirely true. Coasting through the slipstreams of more than two cars, especially on bends, noticeably hit the framerate, though it seemed to be the hardware that was at fault. Machines crashed regularly in the close environment, the cool-down period obeyed before switching them back suggesting that *Ridge* was in fact suffering from the PS3 rather than vice-versa. Perhaps all that Reiko Nagase FMV made it a little hot under the collar.



Specular highlights and HDR blooms aside, the *Ridge* universe has still to adopt a natural air. Its trackside animation favours spectacle over minutiae, the scenery as interactive as a postcard





FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **TECMO**
DEVELOPER: **TEAM NINJA**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER 15 (US), NOVEMBER 22 (JAPAN), TBC (UK)**

Dead Or Alive Xtreme 2

Itagaki's cheesecake factory prepares its latest recipe, with a richer centre and toppings galore







Those all-important relationships between the girls might well enjoy the sequel's biggest upgrade, the indoor and outdoor environments shaping their emotional states, along with your chances of unlocking the game's items



DOA's camera system loosens with every outing, but the suggestion of a firstperson mode for *DOAX2* goes beyond the usual analogue adjustments of direction and zoom

Dead Or Alive Xtreme is quite literally id software – so much so that any comment on its raunchy feature-set risks stating the subconsciously obvious, or for some reporters, skirting around the obvious with rosy cheeks and an unfamiliar tingle in the loins. Represented in its sequel by an eye-watering 2,700 costumes, 180 non-interactive gravure scenes and a multi-layered natural tanning engine, those big assets – get your double entendres while they're cheap – have always been DOA's least interesting, but of course its most valuable.

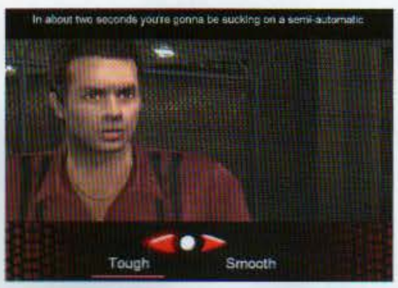
As ever, the real talking points of this Team Ninja game are visual evolution – specifically whether any has been attempted at all – and environmental charm: is Zack Island a fully-fledged tourist trap or barren playground? In preview code, it still shimmers with the vaguest hints of aliased edges, and hankers for a realism it might never receive. Every surface of its coves and nightspots stays uniformly focused and unflatteringly lit, and while its big cosmetic change is self-shadowing, series tradition dictates that even that improvement be negligible. Itagaki's ceramic dolls have been treated with a cautious rather than deft touch, the designer clearly terrified of spoiling the immaculate objects of his obsession.

But at least that should keep things cohesive in spite of an inflated itinerary. Known about for some time, the biggest new event is Marine Race, a flashback to *WaveRace 64* with overactive waters, nitro-boost rewards and stunt opportunities. The competing girls retain a playful aggression as they veer about the rock chicanes, leaving navigation and balance as the most taxing disciplines. Other events such as Butt Battle, Flag Race, Stepping Stones and Tug Of War limit themselves to timed analogue flicks and button hits, with droplets of strategy falling into any available space. Flume-racing event Water Slide has yet to be included in playable code, while Beach Volleyball makes its upgraded return. The changes are actually quite reserved, with more moves and tactics carried over than introduced, though they're exaggerated slightly to create a more pendulous competition. Honestly, you'd think these lines wrote themselves.

The Sopranos: Road To Respect

Another screen gangster licence makes its gaming debut, promising plenty of pain but no psychoanalysis

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **THQ**
DEVELOPER: **7 STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER 17**



All major character actors have lent voices and likenesses to the project, providing a level of authenticity other such titles lack. James Gandolfini's model is rather flattering



In a sense, Sopranos writer and creator **David Chase** is right: "There's no emotional attachment," he states, referring to what he sees as a lack of connection between players and the stories of the games they play. He's right insofar as spin-offs like this often end up reducing beloved movie and TV show characters to vacuous, uninvolved simulations of the real thing. On the other hand, perhaps the reason so many of these titles end up in this state is precisely because of attitudes like his. If nobody actually cared about in-game protagonists, why would we complete anything at all?

The Sopranos: Road To Respect follows the trials and tribulations of your nameless character, the illegitimate son of Sal 'Big Pussy' Bonpensiero. Apprenticed to Mafia boss Tony Soprano, you'll have to work your way up the Family's ranks through a mixture of extortion and intimidation. Conflicts flare up as rival factions attempt to move in on your valuable mob territory. Recognisable locations include the Nuovo Vesuvio restaurant and Tony's own Bada Bing bar,



Games based on popular TV shows should really have a goldmine of material to draw from. On the evidence of these screenshots, it's not yet showing in *Road to Respect*

whilst an eclectic soundtrack encompasses everything from Verdi to Mötley Crüe. Avoiding the obstacle the Godfather and Reservoir Dogs games hit will be difficult: that of reflecting the detailed nuances of filmic characters without interrupting a sense of perpetual action.

Chase himself provided the scenario for the game which heightens hopes of it actually holding together in play. The fact that it isn't intended to ape events from the actual show is also a healthy premise, one which has served *Scarface* (see p84) well. But although it's still too early to form a final judgement, it's difficult to suppress cynicism when so many of the screenshots revealed so far portray one of two hackneyed themes: sex and extreme violence.

Phantasy Star Universe

The last format to be added to Phantasy Star's online universe looks set to be the foremost choice for console players

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS2**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **SONIC TEAM**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW (JAPAN), NOVEMBER (UK)**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E150, E168**



However shaky the debut of *Phantasy Star Universe* on PS2 (see **E**168), there's definitely a second wind waiting for the MMORPG on 360. If the framework presented in the closed beta preview holds for the finished release, then it's going to offer an online experience as untroubled as any on the console – login, design character and go, albeit with a subs fee that looks set to weigh in at £7 per month. It's far from a visual highlight for a 360 title, but it's beautifully clean and smooth if not beautiful, and its style is very much a continuation of *Phantasy Star Online*, from the effort needed to coax a beguiling character from the bizarre specifics of its editing options, through to the hit 'n' miss grotesque of the enemy designs.

It's a more complex offering than *PSO*, of course, and its collection of hubs needs time to become a recognised neighbourhood, but it seems set to reciprocate the colour and tightly-knit social play of the Dreamcast original – teams of up to six, and a control scheme that sits comfortably on a pad, offering five combat configurations chosen from the 20 weapon classes. The next, and just as vital, question is this: of those console gamers whose eyes were opened by the original, how many have migrated, now too busy stomping their way through *World Of WarCraft*'s Battlegrounds to return? There's definitely room in there for it to blossom on 360, especially with it offering a much more wieldy experience than the machine's conversion of *Final Fantasy XI*, but it'll likely all come down to which abbreviation – MMO or *PSO* – matters the most to you.



Some character classes come into their own at level 20. Beasts, for example, change into powerful creatures via a Nanoblast power. And for those worried about the need to commit, four slots per profile are provided for alts





Firstperson aiming with handguns and longbows isn't news, but its limitation – you'll have to stand still – can be overcome by holding the left bumper



Need For Speed Carbon

EA's Christmas turkey – meant in the best possible sense – has all the trimmings, but gets served up cold

FORMAT: **360, GC, PC, PS2, PS3, PSP, XBOX, Wii**
PUBLISHER: **EA GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **EA BLACK BOX**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER 3 (360, GC, PC, PS2, PSP, XBOX) TBA (PS3, Wii)**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E166**



Need For Speed Carbon has turned down the heat from last year's *Most Wanted*. Gone is the warmth of its daytime, replaced by a cold return to the rich alien-attack neon of *Underground*'s night. The police, too, have taken a relative back seat; they're still a presence that needs outrunning, but not a fundamental one to be tangled with continually in order to rise up the rungs of respect within Palmont city's tuner-racing elite.

And while Palmont is an urban centre of eternal midnight, any fears over road visibility are quickly exorcised by the nuclear lighting that bathes it. Even on its most remote mountainside roads – where the really important showdowns take place, around Carbon Canyon – the player's own car generates enough glow to keep things clear. And another common street-racing irk is about to be rubbed out: *Carbon* introduces Wingmen, three categories of partner that help by following commands during a race or event. Blockers will do their best to spin your nearest rival out, while Drafters provide a slipstream that's ripe for a boost and slingshot. The third category, Scouts, race ahead while trailing some vivid light traces, to guide you through any hidden backstreets or alleys available – a solution to the shortcut problem that removes the need for intimate knowledge of a particular course.

Some other issues remain, though. The traffic is annoyingly twitchy in its reactions, and the GPS system isn't as tightly locked down as that of *Test Drive Unlimited*, neither providing strong enough guidance for slip roads and multi-threaded junctions, nor for which side of a restricted-access motorway to take. And despite the claims of a new physics model – vehicles are certainly more willing to tilt– the heavier-than-most handling still remains, as does the speed-sapping handbrake.

Some 43 pieces of *Carbon* content are currently available on the review-network Marketplace. Given this, and the completeness of the preview code, the 360 version, at least, appears to be running on time and on target







***Most Wanted*'s stylised cinematics return, featuring real-world actors slicked over with the game's gloss. It's a better effort than last year's, but while *Carbon*'s aim is for them to be larger-than-life, some still come across as ill-advised cosplayers**



TITLE: **MASS EFFECT**
FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS**
DEVELOPER: **BIOWARE**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **2007**

MASS PRODUCTION

FROM STAR WARS TO A STAR TREK – BIOWARE PREPARES TO REVISIT SPACE ON ITS OWN TERMS

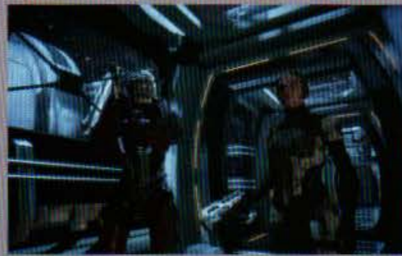


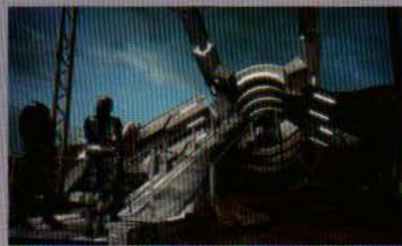
It's not like BioWare hasn't reached for the stars before. *Knights Of The Old Republic*, while technically not the first RPG on Xbox – that honour falls to *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* – was the first time that owners of the console got to experience a bout of role-playing that felt anywhere close to traditional. And very nearly the last, too: subsequent Xbox RPG outings like *Sudeki* and *Fable* were too busy putting an accent on action to bother with the flair and timing of strictly order-based combat. *KOTOR* was a chance for BioWare to prove its console mettle and ability to tap a rich licence for anything but poor effect, offering a fresh angle on Star Wars, a universe that's dangerously well-known and well-travelled by gamers. Having expanded *KOTOR*'s framework to include exploding fisticuffs and mystical kung fu in *Jade Empire*, it's now ready throw itself into more serious action RPG territory. And with *Mass Effect*, BioWare is pushing itself harder than ever before in its strongest areas – flexible stories and high-impact character development – while also trying to accommodate similarly flexible squad-based shooter combat.

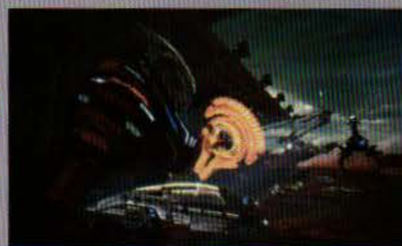
As if that wasn't enough of a stride, *Mass Effect* is also the first act of a trilogy. The idea of an unreleased videogame belonging to a trilogy means a lot, much more than its confirmation as a franchise. It implies a conclusion that's not conclusive, and potential torture for those that fall in love with it, hungry for the next instalment or fearful for its premature demise. But, straightforwardly, BioWare's vision is for a story that's too big for one game to contain. It does, after all, deal with the destiny of an entire galaxy and the life within. Its setup is suitably ripe for such an arc, though, a literal universe with its own codex of races and preamble in place before the player has even had chance to decide what kind of hairstyle they'd like: protagonist Commander Shepard – note the lack of gender – is the captain of the SS Normandy, and the sole human member of Specter, an elite peacekeeping force employed by *Mass Effect*'s galactic council to police a Milky Way's worth of beat. It begins with the investigation of a rogue Specter agent – a Turian, a proud, austere and militarily advanced avian-like race whose bloody first contact with humanity eventually led to mankind being recognised and absorbed into the council, noted for its gritty pragmatism and ability to adapt. Shepard's findings soon peel away the skin of a much bigger, two-pronged, trilogy-sized problem. Most ominous is the imminent endpoint of an extinction cycle where all organic life gets wiped out, and which occurs, for whatever reason, every 50,000 years. But more pressing is the rise of the Geth, a race of humanoid AIs with a networked brain, who could be though of as perhaps the world's greatest make-believe game developer – the more Geth that are gathered together, the smarter the group becomes, but segregate one and it'll revert to an animal state (ideal for

not leaking details to the press, say). After 300 years of growth and advancement, the Geth are about to clash with Specter, and Shepard.

This isn't a textbook tussle between good and evil, but something less simple, and a redefining of what it means to be a humanitarian. Shepard's actions will either bring peace and unity to the galaxy, or raise humanity to dominate it. Which, given the trilogy approach, raises an even thornier issue: with all three titles planned to hit during 360's lifespan – it's currently exclusive – it's intended that saves will be transferable to subsequent episodes. That timetable may seem a nightmarish challenge, but it's one that BioWare is insistent on aiming for in a game that, publicly, it's exceptionally proud of. This opens up significant room for expansion and downloadable content, too, something that's definitely in the pipeline, offering the opportunity to tie player and game together while the next instalment is in the womb.







Although combat is real-time, there's always the option to pause and give considered instructions to your squad-mates about their weapon-choice, target, or position, or to take control of them directly, leaving Shepherd to his AI

SHEPARD'S ACTIONS WILL EITHER BRING PEACE AND UNITY TO THE GALAXY, OR RAISE HUMANITY TO DOMINATE IT

***Mass Effect* is**, in some ways, BioWare's own Star Wars: slick-skinned alien races, thickly moulded battle suits, adventurous spacefaring and a somewhat old-school imagining of the future (the year 2183). That's not to rob *Mass Effect* of its style and flavour – it's true ground-up sci-fi, as opposed to ubiquitous militaristic make-believe, a from-scratch imagining that can bend to the studio's plans in a way that anything pulled from Lucas's revered but stringently-defined world can't. This is what enables *Mass Effect* to dirty the moral waters more than was possible when working with the generic codes of the Jedi and Sith. And there's another presence in the game that can't quite avoid the Star Wars sensation: Dark Energy. This fundamental force has clearer roots than Obi-Wan's witterings, with 'mass effect' descriptive of a fifth fundamental interaction that



Voice support – likely for squad orders – for *Mass Effect* was mooted some time ago, but has been confirmed as not appearing in the final game. There's no stated difference in the game for those players without a HDD, either, apart from restricting just how much of the DLC you can access









Experience functions similarly to *KOTOR*, offered after completed quests and goals, but the character upgrade system is more flexible. You're able to improve abilities as soon as they're ready, instead of having to scatter points across a grid of options

underpins all the goings-on of the universe, alongside the four real-world forces: strong, weak, gravitational and electromagnetic. Shepard is an adept in the cultivation of Dark Energy, able to harness this emerging power and wield it for his or her vision for humanity's future. This aspect of character development makes up one of the classes you're asked to choose from at the outset: Biotics, a discipline centred on telekinetic acts. The other classes are Soldier and Tech, with skills in gunplay and mechanical affinity respectively. Choosing how to play the game without having yet played it is a recurring RPG problem, but a second, later specialisation, allows Shepard to double-up, or blend two disciplines.

Which brings us to *Mass Effect*'s adoption of one of gaming's fundamental interactions: shooting. BioWare's current CV of thirdperson shooting begins and ends with *MDK2*, created while between *Baldur's Gates*. This would seem a great chance to take advantage of its merger with gun-specialist Pandemic (see 'Bio where?'), but the combat system is currently being developed in-house, with BioWare planning to receive Pandemic's input later in production. Shepard leads a team of three, but doesn't necessarily spearhead it; while paused, you can swap control between any of your pair of teammates, and direct their fire while Shepard hangs back and applies skills for support or strategic damage. These allies are just as open to your battle preferences as Shepard, to be evolved in whichever direction you feel is best. They're not just action toys, either – they'll pipe up during conversations, add shoptalk when roaming and can even leave the group if they're sufficiently disgusted with Shepard's behaviour.

Soldier-class skills are the most familiar, enabling greater battle effectiveness through a lock-on facility, an improved reticule, the knack to shoot well while running or even a rage-like overdrive option for the shotgun, magnifying its power but dropping its accuracy. As for Tech skills, *KOTOR*'s droid-affecting powers are a good starting point for reference, except the disruption they can wreak now applies to the whole of the Geth, and not just a narrow subset of enemies – shielding can be destroyed, or opponents hacked in order to let a turncoat loose within the opposition. Biotics offer further remote control – the Float power removes an object from gravity's influence, to be flung or placed as needed, while enemies can be lifted out of cover to be shot down again. Everything's geared for ranged combat, from a Biotic push

BIO WHERE?

After last October's merger – where BioWare and Pandemic combined under the aegis and venture capital of Elevation Partners, headed by former EA president John Riccitiello – it seems that expansion, not cross-pollination, has been BioWare's main goal. A new satellite studio has been founded in Austin, staffed in part by former Sony Online veterans, with the goal of taking the company's RPG speciality online. A new handheld division has also emerged, whose initial project is aiming to embrace the peculiar strengths of the DS, and not, as would be suspected, the voice-acting-friendly PSP. The financial support offered by the merger does at least bolster BioWare'a ability to flex itself to meet the demands of modern-day videogame development without having a hernia, and means that the hints that a sequel to *Jade Empire* is currently in production is of little surprise, while perhaps allowing progress on PC RPG *Dragon Age* to remain a mystery for as long as the studio wants it to.











Since the avatar used to present the game is a brawny hardass of a man, it's easy to forget there's plentiful room for customisation. The option to choose Shepard's gender shouldn't jar – not when a gun and a stocky battlesuit are unisex tools for threatening the populace

HERE, BOY

The MAKO rover is the vehicle that Commander Shepard will be using to explore the planets and environments that his/her team drop into. Ready for combat and upgradeable enough to be regarded as a character in its own right, it's the handling of this craft that's proving to be its star quality, a relief as well as a treat; vehicles are an aspect of ambitious adventure games that often gets fumbled. Little leaps will be made possible by jump jets, and the left and right thrusts of these can be controlled independently, meaning you'll be able to tease it across the terrain that each new world rolls out beneath you.

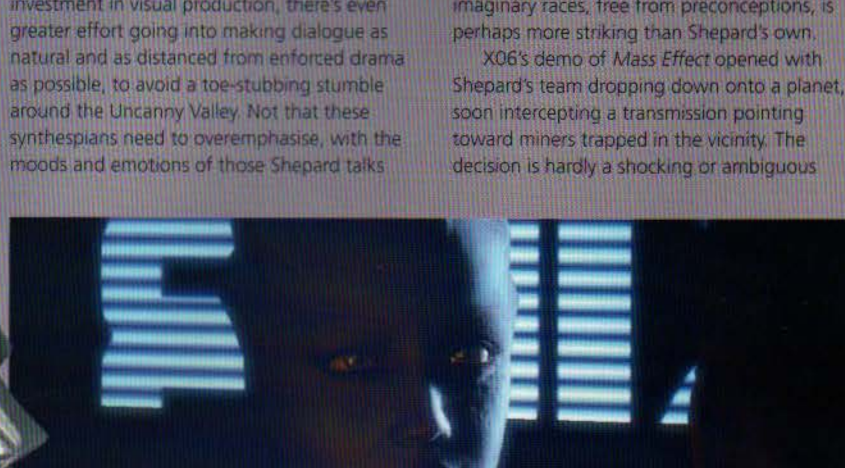




that sends Geth troops scattering to fast-acting grenades, flung like a Frisbee and hitting like a pipe bomb; there's little room for melee work here. BioWare's intention wasn't so much to extend the realtime combat of *Jade Empire* but more to amplify the group tactics and teamwork realised in *KOTOR*.

Words, of course, will speak just as loudly. There are at least 20,000 lines of dialogue in *Mass Effect*, perhaps not surpassing *Oblivion*'s reputed 60,000. But those who've played Bethesda's glacial epic will know that voice repetition sets in all too swiftly, and its colossal world can sometimes feel like it has no more than a dozen inhabitants. A broad selection of voice actors is promised – some names worthy of a press release, but not just yet; ditto the composer of what has so far shown itself to be a coolly dark synth soundtrack. With increased investment in visual production, there's even greater effort going into making dialogue as natural and as distanced from enforced drama as possible, to avoid a toe-stubbing stumble around the Uncanny Valley. Not that these synthespians need to overemphasise, with the moods and emotions of those Shepard talks to expressed as much through body language and facial animations. The resulting presentation is spared a HUD, bar any subtitles and the conversation ring that sits neatly at the bottom of the screen, offering up to six options to control the direction of dialogue. And each line of chatter has been tailored to tie into the mood it represents, so there's no risk of an accidental smile during a gun-waving intimidation. That you can walk away from any conversation is something BioWare seems excessively proud of, but this does at least mean you'll be able to pull out of a lengthy, accidentally-activated chat without speeding through a stutter-rap of dialogue skips. With such an emphasis on facial feedback, it's no surprise that many of the game's alien races have a humanoid structure about them, which doesn't so much subtract from the fantasy as show the humans up – as BioWare admits, the appearances of the imaginary races, free from preconceptions, is perhaps more striking than Shepard's own.

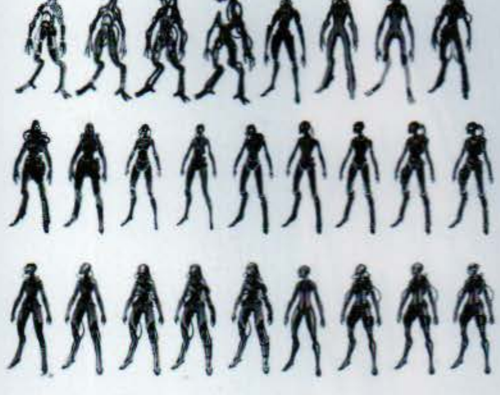
X06's demo of *Mass Effect* opened with Shepard's team dropping down onto a planet, soon intercepting a transmission pointing toward miners trapped in the vicinity. The decision is hardly a shocking or ambiguous

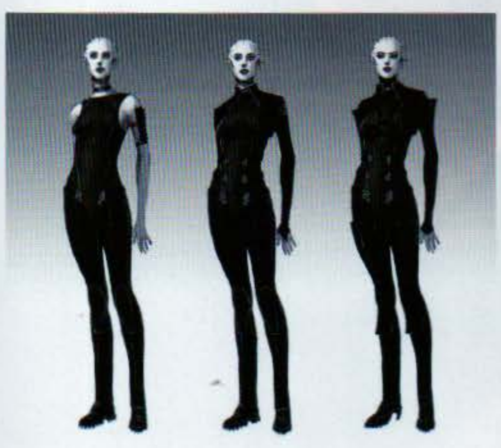


Mass Effect is gloomy, but strikingly so, making way for intense shadows and colours that feel sharp without glare. If there are any doubts about the ability of games to replicate human faces, this one leaves no such reservations about inhuman ones











SS Normandy forms the game's hub, Shepard's interplanetary motorhome for exploring, and a place to store and select teammates. There are confrontations to be had in space, too, but just how confrontational they will be is currently unknown



one in this instance – save them, or press on with the allotted mission – before a military dropship passes overhead which needs to be followed. On the way, the miners are inadvertently rescued, but the decision, and your persuasion, has been made known; dropping onto other planets won't result in such a scripted introduction, sometimes to the extreme of being able to jump into your MAKO rover (see 'Here, boy') and driving off in any direction to pick up the scent of some adventure or other. Over 100 environments are featured, varying in size depending on their location and function. Gas-giant planets offer no avenue for exploration, but their moons may, and a quick scan of any location



The conversation cameras venture much closer to the participants than seen during the banter of *KOTOR* or *Jade Empire*, a focus that's free from HUD details bar dialogue

tactile, making use of the physics within *Mass Effect*'s universe and the playful emergence that can now arise from it.

In terms of what people expect from BioWare's Xbox RPGs, *Mass Effect* is already

IN TERMS OF WHAT PEOPLE EXPECT FROM BIOWARE'S XBOX RPGS, MASS EFFECT IS POISED TO CONTINUE THEIR APPEAL

will offer a heads-up on whether a visit is worth your time. Terra firma is just a part of *Mass Effect*'s stage, with passing freighters and some other heavenly bodies presenting opportunities and sub-quests to bulk out the finer details of the plot or a reward to buff up the player's abilities, as well as giving the feeling of an expanse of space instead of a necklace of assorted planets threaded onto the main plotline. All of this, by the way, was mapped out from the very start, allowing BioWare to avoid a celestial-strength dose of feature creep. One final but slight question: will there be any minigames along the lines of *KOTOR*'s Pazaak card game? BioWare is vague, confirming the existence of such distractions, but intimating that the side orders of gameplay will be more elaborate and

poised to continue their appeal, with a world to unravel and weave back together as the player wishes, bending the motivations of those they encounter to their own end. It's the new ground that's being braved with realtime confrontation and squad combat that's the greatest test, of whether the engine can provide a snappy slickness that wasn't needed or missed in *Jade Empire* or *KOTOR*. *Mass Effect* has been two years in the making, set for a release in the first half of 2007, a bright splodge in the dark, deserted space that is gaming's spring schedule, although it could have a different kind of mass effect – the European release of PS3 – to contend with. Whether Shepard can slow that particular aggressive AI invasion is, at least, a story that won't need a trilogy to answer.



TITLE: **ASSASSIN'S CREED**
FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE (MONTREAL)**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **2007**

PLAYING GOD

THE PRINCE LEAVES PERSIA BEHIND FOR SOME HOLY UNFAMILIAR TERRITORY

Take a moment to look down. The town is busy – shoppers chat with stall-keepers, builders take a mid-morning lunch-break, the better-off keep their heads down as they go about their business. And you, watching them all, take a step forward into empty air and drop like a hawk to spill death on to peaceful streets. "I didn't want to make a game where you were a murderer," says **Patrice Desilets**, fiercely. "I wanted to make you an assassin."

Now creative director of *Assassin's Creed*, Desilets made his name fulfilling the same role on *Prince Of Persia: The Sands Of Time*. That game had a self-explanatory hero whose name told you all you needed to know; what else could the Prince be but spoilt brat, romantic lead and virtuoso swordsman? *Assassin's Creed*'s star, Altaïr, is much harder to read, as a trained killer ought to be. A member of the Order of Assassins, an organisation of both medieval historical record and modern conspiracy theory,





PAST PRESENTS

Japanese game designers have long plundered their past as the setting for action games, but it's still curiously rare in the west. Historical recreations remain the preserve of the strategy game, and Capcom beat Creative Assembly to the punch when *Shadow Of Rome* arrived ahead of *Spartan: Total Warrior*. What does Desilets make of that discrepancy? "I think that's a question you should put to European game designers! For North Americans it's hard. We've only been around 400 years – it's not a part of us in the same way. But for sure historical games are harder to do. These were real events and real people, and there are a lot of people who know about the details of how life was, so you'd better not fuck it up. But I think the Japanese have turned a page on their history in a way, we haven't – the Crusades are still going on in some people's minds, so it can be harder for western developers to make games like that. That's why for most games, history still starts with World War II."



he patrols Acre as it comes under siege from the armies of the Third Crusade. The game is set in 1191, the year the city fell to the Christians, themselves blockaded by Saladin's Muslim troops. Over the course of this bloody double-siege, thousands of men died both in battle and from disease, and when the city finally surrendered, the Christian armies executed nearly 3,000 prisoners – men, women and children – after negotiations broke down over ransom exchanges. It's a long way from the Saturday afternoon matinee melodrama of magic hourglasses and enchanted daggers.

Desilets is flattered by the Errol Flynn comparisons *Sands Of Time* draws, and quick to credit Jordan Mechner with the original vision, but it's just as plain that he wasn't entirely comfortable following in someone else's footsteps. "I wasn't planning ahead when we were working on *Prince Of Persia* – I tend to focus on one project at a time – but when we finished I wanted to work on something that was more mature, something more for someone of my age – I'm 32 – than that fantasy." But at a time when religious war is a particularly painful subject, was he nervous about tackling the Crusades?

"A lot of the people I spoke to before we began were worried, but I was sure games could tackle these kinds of subjects. And all credit to Ubisoft that they looked at it and said: 'It looks like you know where you're going, so we'll let you go there.'"

He's also quick to point out that, as an assassin, Altaïr doesn't take sides, although he's also realistic about how the order is perceived. "Everything is lost about the Assassins – all their writings, all their history, so all we have is what other people said about them, that they were drug addicts, murderers – terrorists basically. But they had an idea, an idea of how the world should be, and that made them interesting to me. For them, the Bible and the Koran were just books, and you didn't have to do what they said. They didn't want to follow rules, or just look on the surface. They believed that if you could see beneath the surface, then you would know what the world was really like, and what you could really do. That's at the heart of their belief that 'nothing is real, everything is permitted.'" And that is as much Desilets' guiding principle as Altaïr's. *Assassin's Creed* began bare-bones, in a *Super Mario 64*-inspired approach that Desilets refers to as the

"A LOT OF PEOPLE I SPOKE TO WERE WORRIED, BUT I WAS SURE GAMES COULD TACKLE THESE SUBJECTS"





During assassinations (below), Altaïr's element of surprise gives him the upper hand (or knee). In straight fights (left), he's at much more of a disadvantage. One blow can kill, so the goal is escape, not victory





"Nintendo way" – that simply being in the game must be fun. The graceful exuberance of the Prince is promised to be enormously expanded – the game's bullet-point pledge is that everything that extends more than two inches can be climbed – but Desilets is determined to make him more human.

"For me the Prince was always super-human – he could run ten metres along a wall, which no one can do. And one of the things I wanted to do with Altaïr was make him human, a real athlete, someone believable, even though he can do these amazing things that make you go 'wow!' But real people can do that, too, if you look at free-running." But that humanity, and that freedom, is never intended to be at the expense of enjoyment: "We use lots of small animations, because we have to get the transitions right. If you look at some other characters – let's just take an Ubisoft example here so I don't hurt anyone – take Sam Fisher. He's a really great character, and very human, but it means his animations are long, and that's not what we wanted to do. Who wants to watch someone climb a ladder for 30 seconds? I've only got five seconds. And so some of our movements are more cartoony – it's the Mario thing again – so that we can keep up the pace."

The Sands Of Time remains one of the few truly 3D games, and while *Assassin's* historical accuracy means it can't match those dizzying heights, there's a real sense of the vertical when Altaïr takes to his natural domain: rooftops



And Desilets' fascination with human-ness doesn't stop at Altaïr. "Going from *The Sands Of Time* to next-gen, the thing I wanted to do was people. I wanted to have a real sense of crowd, of busyness – a density of people that you could play with. That's a big part of why we chose a medieval setting. If you have narrow, winding streets then you don't need a lot of people to make it feel densely populated. If we'd set the game in New York we would have needed thousands! But in Acre, it only takes a few dozen." And in Acre the organic layout of the streets meant that route-planning can be improvised and unpredictable. Combined, the thronged streets are integral to Desilets' determination to evolve how the game plays. "I wanted to make it so that NPCs could be more than just enemies – that they would be people." And so, rather than simply acting as mission waypoints or background stooges, Acre's inhabitants are active participants, closing ranks like linebackers if Altaïr tries to flee a murder scene, or deliberately misleading pursuing guards if they've previously been converted to his cause.

So if the movement system (see 'Pulling strings') and Acre's architecture provide the underlying framework, then Desilets' mission design provides the 'everything is permitted'. There's still little confirmed about the detail of the game, but it seems reasonable to expect that as you move from city to city (the game also includes accurate historical models of Damascus and Jerusalem), Altaïr may also be called upon to spy and steal as he plies his trade between the different factions vying for dominance. The recurring trend, however, will be freedom of choice: "I didn't want to make the kind of game where you do a poisoning mission and when you get there you have to put the poison in the one place where the designer decided you had to put the poison. I want you to be able to act the way you like." But while the detail of the game may be down to the player, the rhythm is more controlled: "When you're approaching your target, there are a lot of things you can do, but you'll want to take a low profile. And when you're leaving afterwards, there are a lot of things you can do, but you'll want to get the hell out of there, fast. So there's a lot of freedom, but it's within those kinds of boundaries. It gives great natural pacing."



Having won their trust, Altaïr can blend in with a procession of monks to get close to his target. It's a neat idea, but there's no indication yet if the game can come up with other, equally plausible scenarios

Games have long struggled to balance stealth with action, and freedom with



direction, and too little has been revealed of *Assassin's Creed* to be sure how it will fare. Its recent debut as a 360 title at X06 was little more than a frame-for-frame rerun of the behind-closed-doors PS3 demo at E3. The acrobatics are dazzling – unsurprising, allowing for the team's background ("We learned so much on *Sands Of Time*'" says Desilets. "The Prince is in our heads, and we used that for this game,") but the horse-riding and combat look more stilted, and it's impossible to judge if interactions with the crowd (blending in with a procession of monks, falling foul of a thick gaggle of bystanders) will feel fluid or staged. Desilets, however, has already come to terms with the idea that compromises need to be made in order to satisfy the expectations of conventional gamers. "I guess I don't play games the way other people play them, or I don't play the same games," he says, wryly. "You didn't see that kind of gameyness in *Sands Of Time* – where you'd do two minutes of some gameplay and then you'd be given a score at the end and then go on to the next section. I don't want to do that. But I've come to recognise that a lot of players like that kind of gameyness, so I try to put more in – but for me I want a continuous experience."

That pragmatism was also suspected to be behind the game's twist – a modern-day component to the game which has been endlessly telegraphed by glimpses of molecular diagrams and futuristic HUDs, but so far never explained. What was the thinking behind giving those hints? Was it to reassure potential players alienated by the Muslim, medieval setting? Desilets laughs and takes some time to marshal his words. "I'll tell you now, this is hard for me to talk about. If we could talk about it after the game was finished, I could say so much! But for now, I want to keep quiet. But it comes from a vision that I had, and I always try to follow my visions, I can say that much. So, this twist... it's not just a business decision, that's for sure. But you know Ubisoft, we're a company that has franchises. So it's also part of something much bigger, something bigger than just this... conversation." He stops short of saying that it's something much bigger than this game, but the implication is clear that the survival of the Order of Assassins to the current day will allow for additional instalments, where Altaïr can be sent in to other conflicts to try to turn slaughter into peace.

But would it have to be Altaïr? The team has lovingly documented his genesis – the suspicion that the shadowy leader of

MIND GAMES

Assassin's Creed **has already excited a lot of interest, and a lot of speculation, particularly with reference to the twist. Is Desilets worried that people may already have expectations about what the game will be like, or does he see the pre-release hype as an opportunity to set players up for events in the game? Neither, it turns out. "No, I'm not interested," he says, plainly. "I go on the forums to see what the vibe is like, and it's nice to see that it's positive, but I'm not listening to them. I'm just a guy in Montreal, on the second floor of a big building, trying to make a game. The pressure comes from what I see on the screen, from trying to take the vision that I have in my mind and make it real, getting a little closer day by day. That's where the real pressure comes from, from inside."**



The Sands Of Time was often a puzzle game, as you spied out the viable route. In *Assassin's* there are effectively millions, testing imagination, not skill



Patrice Desilets moved straight from *The Sands Of Time* to *Assassin's Creed*, skipping *Warrior Within* and *The Two Thrones*







Claims for what 360 and PS3 can do for AI are already becoming commonplace, but both enemies and NPCs will need a keen sense of their environment, and of the context of Altaïr's actions, in order to live up to Desilets' vision of an intelligently responsive world. If it works as planned, it's likely that simply running away – and up, and over, and through, and between – will never have been so much fun

the Assassins is actually the father who deserted him, the diligence with which his clothing and movement have been modelled on the bird of prey which inspired him – but how much does a game like *Assassin's Creed* need a conventional hero? Might the player be able to associate with him more closely if Desilets followed the current trend for customisable avatars? "I think there are different elements to it, and it can be great to have a game where you can

lesson, he's creating a world – a seamless experience where story, setting and gameplay are indistinguishable. "I guess it's because my background isn't games, my background is theatre and film. So because I was an actor – not a proper actor! Just in high school and things – that's what I think of when I make a game. When you're in a Shakespeare play, you can't go on stage and say anything, or do anything – there's a story – but it's still something active and creative."

WHEN YOU'RE IN A SHAKESPEARE PLAY, YOU CAN'T JUST SAY ANYTHING, OR DO ANYTHING – THERE'S A STORY"

make the character look like yourself, or like a big, fat bastard, but for me, why should I care about the guy in something like *Saints Row*? I just made him. If I don't like him I can make another one. He's a nobody, he doesn't matter. But with Altaïr – and I think with the Prince – he's somebody, you believe he matters, and you want to play his part in the game."

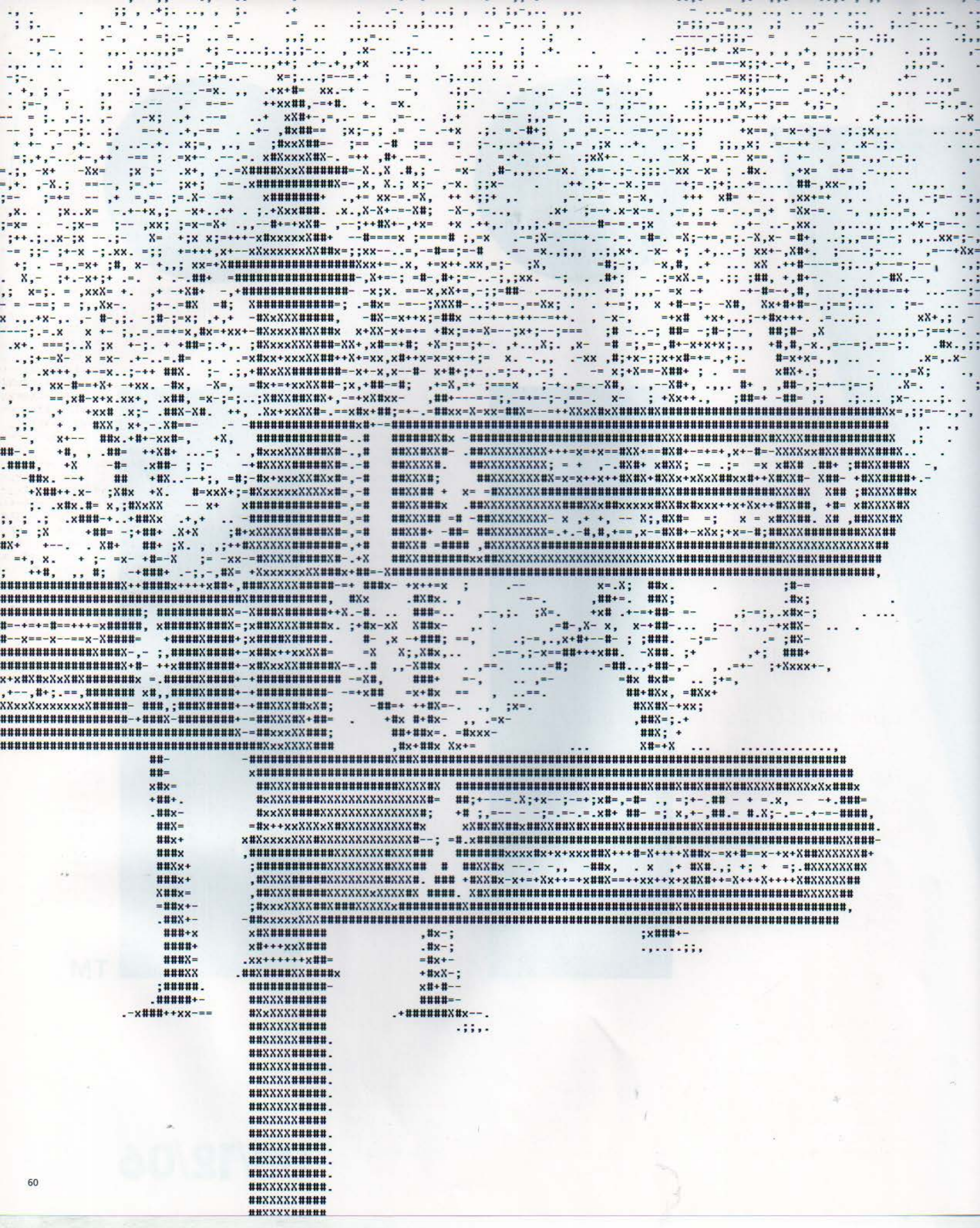
And it's this that makes sense of Desilets' seemingly unshakeable confidence that his game can tackle such a prickly-looking balancing act: setting a Mario-inspired action game during a period of historical atrocity; offering unbounded freedom in a game driven by narrative; creating a hero whose pacifist goals are achieved through mercenary murder. He's not trying to shoehorn a story into a game, or a game into a history

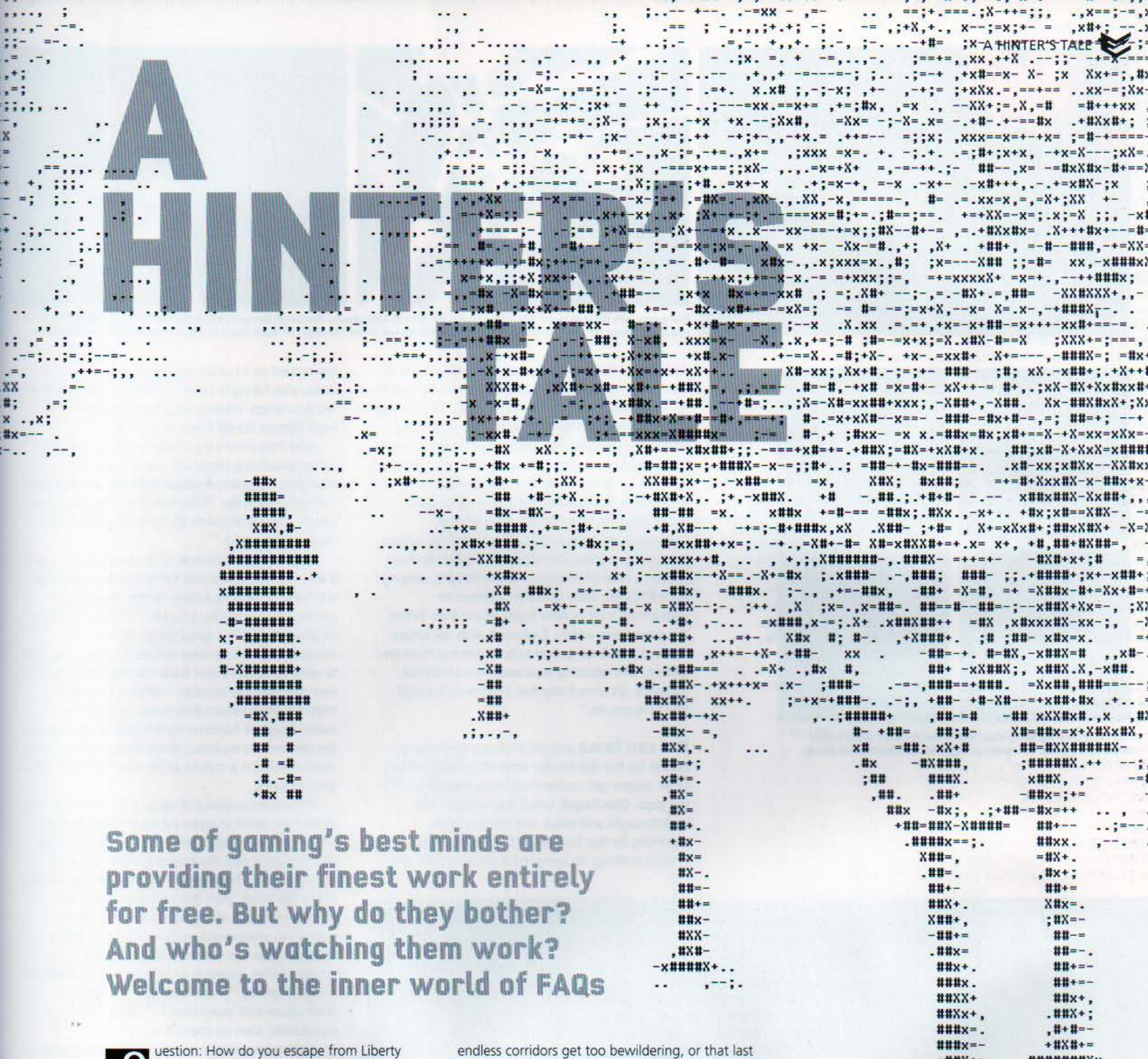
It's a simple shift of perspective, but one which changes everything. The argument about games and their relationship with other art and entertainment forms always gets bogged down by assumptions that gamers consume games in the way cinema-goers consume films. But games don't have an audience, they have participants. Music and theatre, film and TV have for centuries been tackling far more ambitious ideas by relying on the skill and imagination of their performers. Now Desilets and his team in Montreal are building a story that relies on its players to bring it to life. Whether or not it will work remains to be seen, but it's hard to imagine a better blueprint than that which *The Sands Of Time* brought so vividly to life.

PULLING STRINGS

At E3, *Assassin's Creed*'s controls were explained in terms of taking control of Altaïr like a puppeteer. Of the four face buttons, one would govern his head, one his free arm, one his weapon arm and the last his legs. The specific movement would be context-sensitive, and a shoulder button modifier would determine whether that movement was high profile – a violent shove or a eye-catching sprint – or low profile – a gentle pressure or a sly dodge. Desilets acknowledges that, after testing, the practice may have to be a bit more conventional than the principle. "That's still the idea that's underneath everything in the game, but we found in testing that people would get confused about two buttons which could do the same thing. And for things like horse-riding, people weren't certain which parts of their body they would need to use. Combat is also very different." It's not yet been decided how it will be presented in game, but it may be that since actions tend to naturally cluster around one button – so the 'legs' button inevitably includes all the free-running commands, and the free hand tends to include all NPC interaction – that this is how players think of them. What is likely is that an optional HUD, which players can turn off, will provide contextual prompts for those who want them.







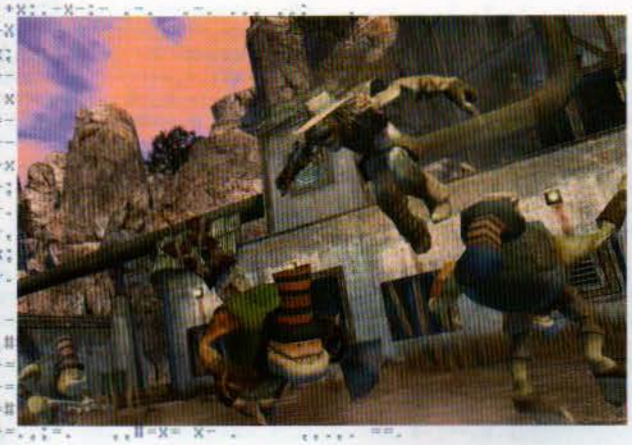
A HINTER'S TALE

Some of gaming's best minds are providing their finest work entirely for free. But why do they bother? And who's watching them work? Welcome to the inner world of FAQs

Question: How do you escape from Liberty Island, navigate the Water Temple, defeat Alraune, and capture Rayquaza (the ultra-rare Sky High Pokémon), while still ensuring that your Urban Champion strategy will knock nine out of ten opponents into the manhole?

Answer: By reading a FAQ. Belittled, seldom acknowledged, but frequently consulted, FAQs are the closest thing gaming has to a hidden underworld. And what a place it is: a strange monochrome inversion of the colourful lands on the television screen, where expensive titles are reduced to lists and bugs and ASCII maps, where brilliant insights are nestled alongside howling spelling mistakes, where answers are all around, and everything is free. FAQs are the place to go when the challenge of a game turns sour, whenever those endless corridors get too bewildering, or that last treasure chest proves too elusive. They're often seen as a sign that a developer has misjudged the balance between challenging fun and grinding labour – but can that really be the case when a trawl through Google reveals walkthroughs for almost every game ever created? FAQs may answer questions, but they raise them as well: Where did they come from? Who writes them? Are they having any effect on the way games are made?

Rarely just lists of answers, the majority of FAQs take the form of walkthroughs, many including detailed maps and appendices, and the quality ranges enormously. Some are elaborate and carefully constructed, others are barely readable, but FAQs have been part of the background noise of gaming ever since the launch of the Video Game FAQ







Few games take the time to provide a breadcrumb trail for stranded players. *Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath* (left) and *Galleon* (middle) both provided incremental hint systems from within the game. *Broken Sword: The Angel Of Death* (right) includes a full solution on its website



Clockwise from top left: prolific FAQers Alex Eagleson, Brian Sulpher and Dan Engel, and co-founder of Piggyback Interactive Louie Beatty

Archive in 1995, later renamed GameFAQs.com. It wasn't the first site of its kind, but it was the first to go mainstream. Founded by Jeff 'CjayC' Veasey, and originally hosting 100 articles, the site now holds information on over 50,000 titles, all of them written by devoted gamers for little or no monetary reward.

And the level of that devotion is often astounding. Some FAQ writers cover a favourite game and then stop. Others, such as **Alex Eagleson**, are more prolific. Like many FAQ writers, Eagleson is a university student in his 20s. He has written a total of 53 unique walkthroughs, ranging from RPGs like *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* to platformers such as *New Super Mario Bros.* While the games vary widely, Eagleson's aims are simple: "There's a definite appeal to both helping frustrated gamers, and exposing your work to such a wide audience. It's something that anyone with a little free time can do."

But can fame and philanthropy be the only reason for the spectacular amounts of FAQs? Many other writers get involved out of an impulse to fill in the gaps. **Dan Engel**, who's created over 360 walkthroughs and maps, was lured in while searching for tips for the SNES game *Equinox*. Finding nothing, he compiled a guide himself, and has moved on to covering series like *Metroid* and *Zelda*, also taking in minor games like *Startropics* and *Mario's Picross*. Writing FAQs has made him "the most famous Daniel Engel on Google".

And then there's the challenge itself. "I enjoy doing something constructive and constantly changing," explains **Andrew Schultz**, another self-confessed gap-filler. "I like puzzling things out. The people that do this work the best are able to pick apart whole worlds."

FAQ writing is also one of the best ways to create a sense of ownership and identity with a given title, and Schultz, who exclusively writes about older games, often feels like a curator: "Technology may be obsolete, but the good games that ran on obsolete technology never will be. I enjoy being able to write for a game and know I'm the first person to save that memory in detail." While it may seem relatively unimportant that there's a complete walkthrough of *Rainbow Islands* safe for posterity on the day the sun explodes, this attention to history is much needed in a culture as forward-facing as the gaming world.

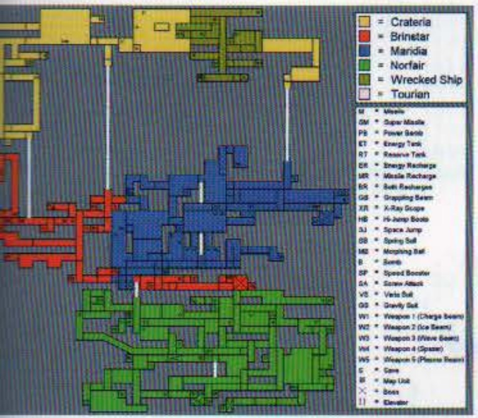
If there are a variety of reasons for writing them, at least it's easier to agree on what makes a good FAQ. "The best guides cover the most information and they do it with the fewest number of words," says Eagleson. "People really appreciate it when you get to the point. Then there's the author's own personal flair: I've always made an effort to do something unique with each new guide." **Brian Sulpher**, who has written dozens of FAQs for a variety of sites, suggests another important element: a logical format. "A file may have the best information ever assembled," he says, "but if it's unreadable, then no one will use it."

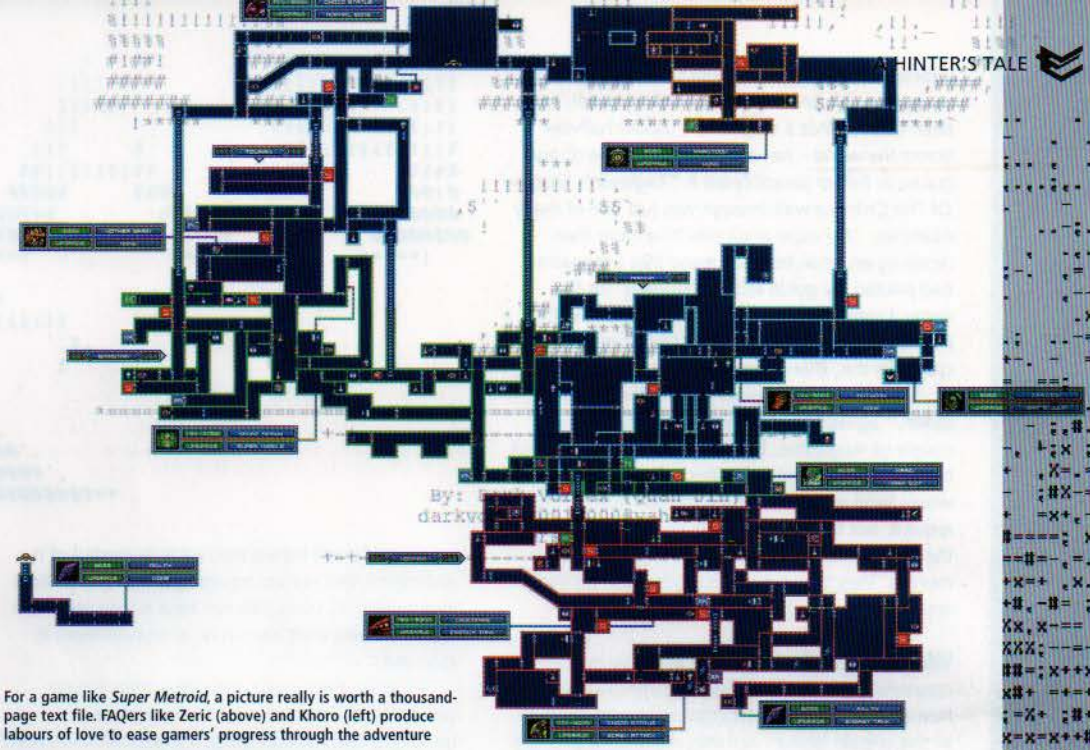
"Some people love to write for popular games, others only like unpopular games," says Engel when asked how he picks the titles he writes about. "I tend to write for a game that no one has written a complete FAQ for. I find it counter-productive to write for *Final Fantasy VII*, when it already has 12 other monstrous and complete guides." Often, an established writer will have a title suggested to them. Equally, sites like GameFAQs operate bounty boards – lists of wanted games, with rewards attached.

Schultz admits that, once the game has been chosen, starting is often the hardest part of the process. "I can actually be very intimidated by a game at first, but then I start hacking away at it. Generally I don't start until I can master the first few puzzles." Eagleson agrees: "There's a learning curve to overcome before you're able to get a basic grasp

Making money

One of the least discussed areas of FAQ writing is the financial side. While it's unlikely that there are many people making a complete living out of walkthroughs, Eagleson suggests that there are still opportunities to cash in. "We should first distinguish between 'free work with benefits' and 'paid work'," he suggests. "The former is more common. Say for example you write a guide and post it on GameFAQs.com; that guide may then be entered into the 'FAQ of the Month' contest. If it wins, the author gets a $50 gift certificate. Some people include PayPal links for donations in their guides. This typically won't bring in more than a few dollars a month. Sometimes people sell 'premium' versions of the guides on their websites or on eBay. Often, authors will accept an exclusive project for nothing more than a free copy of the game for which they are writing." Despite the avenues for money-making, FAQs remain largely a labour of love. "Remember that writing for profit makes up only a very small percentages of the FAQ writing community," Eagleson concludes. "It is not the ultimate goal of most writers to make money off their hobby – the vast majority simply do it for fun, and some even frown on the idea of profiting from it."





For a game like *Super Metroid*, a picture really is worth a thousand-page text file. FAQers like Zeric (above) and Khoro (left) produce labours of love to ease gamers' progress through the adventure

on how the game works. Once I have this figured out, I can outline what the guide is going to need."

"As far as the writing process goes, everyone is different," says Engel. "Some people play the whole game through first before writing anything. Others take quick notes or even rig up a VCR to record as they play. I write on my first trip through a game. This means that I sometimes have to go back in my notes to change strategies or add sections, but it works well for me."

Sulpher suggests the writing process is just as often dictated by the type of game as it is by the writer: "You really need to approach each genre differently. An RPG requires patience. You need to gather all of the information while going through, so keeping a key list is crucial. Compare that to an arcade game, where you need to be able to figure out how bonus scores are created and applied, and you need two completely different skill sets."

"I ANALYSED EVERYTHING. IT BECAME SO BAD THAT I HAD TO FORCE MYSELF TO START GAMING FOR FUN AGAIN"

But even with the right process in place, few FAQs get written overnight. "The time it takes to finish a guide varies so much, it's difficult to even find an average," sighs Eagleson. "Depending on the size of the game, the type of game, and the amount of time one author dedicates, you could spend months working on a single guide."

"It also depends on what else you've got going on in your life," says Engel. "Many writers produce a lot less once the school season starts up again."

Given this, it's unsurprising that burnout is common on the FAQ scene. "It can be tough some days to write," says Sulpher, "and those who cannot overcome that when they are in a bad stretch do not last long." Sulpher admits that writing FAQs can seriously change your relationship with gaming: "I started to analyse everything about a game, figuring out how to do every little thing. It became so bad I had to force myself to start gaming just for fun again. You need to keep it fun."

But writing walkthroughs is not always as lonely an occupation as it sounds. "I have received thousands of emails from gamers," says Eagleson. "The vast majority of these are either requests for additional help, or submission of extra information. In addition to this there is plenty of positive feedback from people who simply wish to say thank you. I always appreciate that. I've heard of some authors who were contacted by small-scale developers in response to the guides they wrote for their games, but it's certainly not a common occurrence. When I was at my peak, I was getting an incredible amount of feedback and I knew that what I was doing was really helping people."

"I get different forms of feedback for my FAQs," notes Engel. "I get some that's downright bizarre. I've had people ask me for alternate versions of my maps, with extra secrets and info that I'm 'keeping from them'. I get people that think I created the game. I've had someone mistake me for Cher somehow – still scratching my head over that one. Once I heard from a student at Princeton University that had used my huge overworld map for *The Legend Of Zelda*, and combined my other maps for the game into something even bigger. He displayed it on a gigantic video wall for their computer science program and sent me photos. That was pretty impressive, even if he did get my name wrong in the picture."

Feedback, though important, is only a small part of the wider community that has grown up amongst the various FAQ sites. "In recent years the community is not as competitive as it used to be," says Sulpher. "Other writers are usually willing to help new writers – just be polite and you will get the same in turn." "There's still rivalry between writers, friendly or non," adds Schultz. "Non-friendly occurs when people start bragging about their prowess. You have to remember that it's a hobby and if you were really creative you'd be writing the games."

The community is often helpful in dealing with a persistent problem for FAQ writers: plagiarism. Engel says writers spend a lot of their time "looking out for each other's new work, pointing out sites that aren't to be trusted, warning about possible thieves. People have been discovered in the past copying FAQs from other writers, or even copying out of printed strategy guides. In either case, the writer loses a lot of respect and often has all of their work deleted."

Eagleson has fallen foul of another surprisingly

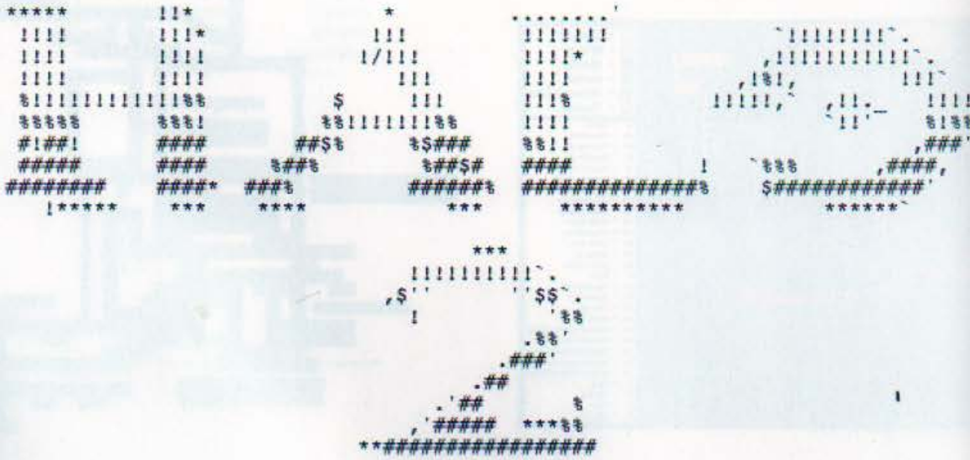




Final Fantasy VII has spent 2,936 days (eight years) in the GameFAQs top 50, and *Ocarina Of Time* 2,485 days (just under seven years). *FFIX* and *FFX* have each also notched up close to 2,000 days there

widespread trend: having work stolen by gaming magazines. "A few authors, including myself, have been notified that a magazine – usually halfway across the world – has either reprinted one of our guides in full, or paraphrased it." Eagleson's *Shadow Of The Colossus* walkthrough was just one of many examples: "My experience was little more than receiving an email from someone that a magazine had printed my guide as their 'strategy' for the game. I confirmed it with a few other people. I've heard of other similar incidents. Unfortunately in cases like this, there is very little we can do."

"FAQ writers are always getting their work stolen," agrees Engel. "My work has been in a couple of magazines, but one in particular I was not happy with. I agreed to let them use my work if they would send me a copy of the magazine. A simple request, but they never did deliver on their side of the arrangement, despite me hassling them for months. They'll have a much harder time getting any help from me in the future."



Writing guides is a time-intensive business, consuming thousands of hours yearly. And yet, how does the development community feel about all this unpaid labour? Are they aware that so many of their games are sending people to the internet in frustration?

If it's primarily poor difficulty balancing that drives people to FAQs, **Charles Cecil**, creator of the *Broken Sword* series, puts a lot of the problems with balancing down to the make-up of the audience: "We have a big difference between experienced adventure game players who understand the grammar of the game, and on the other hand we're trying to draw in people who've never played before. Adventures need to be user-friendly for inexperienced people, yet I've got to put a couple of really difficult puzzles in so that the very experienced gamers get stumped. But then we've got to accept that the others are going to have to look the answer up." His solution to this is to provide free hints on the Revolution Software website: "By putting hints on our website it means that we're in control of it, and means that we can try and get the level of hints about right. It's tricky. Our fan base is very important to us. The very least we can do is support them in this area."

Crucially, Cecil uses hints rather than a direct walkthrough. Taking the form of a series of questions, each click provides a slightly more detailed prompt, coaxing the player into working out the answer for themselves. It's an ideal solution, and serves a real purpose: Cecil would rather his players didn't have to resort to FAQs. "FAQs tend to be walkthroughs, and the walkthroughs give you the solution in a rather clinical way. It takes any of the satisfaction out of playing the game. A Q&A is much more fun, because it's written in a jokey way and hopefully reflects the style of the game."

None of this means that Cecil isn't pleased that people use their time to write FAQs for his games: "I'm delighted. I'm very proud of the fact that there's so much passion about the games that I write, that people take ownership." Asked if he sees the amount of FAQs generated for any given game as a sign that he got the design wrong, Cecil laughs. "It would be very difficult to justify statistically the number of walkthroughs being in some way proportional to the difficulty of the game. I'm not sure there would be that much correlation."

Not many developers see offering hints as essential a part of their responsibility as providing technical support, though, and solutions as carefully devised as Cecil's are the exception rather than the rule. For those who do get involved, the results are not always successful. The green guidance arrows of *Perfect Dark Zero* were met with almost universal displeasure. Players felt patronised, and the game itself was compromised – its linearity revealed in an oddly brutal manner. Other games, such as *Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath*, have taken a more nuanced approach to helping out, providing hints after a player has died at the same point more than three times.

NOT MANY DEVELOPERS SEE OFFERING HINTS AS ESSENTIAL A PART OF THEIR RESPONSIBILITY AS TECH SUPPORT

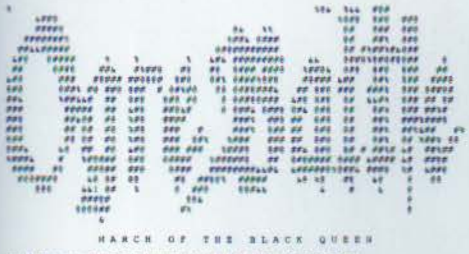
Another way for developers to control hints is by collaborating on printed guides. It's perhaps surprising to note that, given the availability of free walkthroughs, sales of game guides are improving year on year. **Louie Beatty**, co-founder of Piggyback Interactive, has given this matter a lot of thought: "I think the question here is: 'Why should someone have to pay for a guide?' It is an important question and I think the answer should start with: 'No one should be sold a bad guide. If a guide costs money then it needs to have the highest level of quality control, it must be 100 per cent complete, it must be nicely produced and it has to be printed on good quality paper on the best printing presses available'. Piggyback guides are 100 per cent complete and we are the only guide publisher to make that promise. To achieve this, we have teams of 20–30 people working on the guide for a period of up to seven months." Lavish, intelligent and carrying a wealth of

The future of FAQs



Games like *God Hand* – spectacular, technical and entertaining – are the forefront of the new trend for YouTube-based videogame guides, created by capable players such as UK-based Saurian

Cecil's approach to tips for *Broken Sword 4* is similar to that of sites such as UHS-Hints.com, which eschews straight walkthroughs in favour of lists of specific questions, only displaying as much info as you want to see. It's one of the ways that FAQs are changing. YouTube is another. Although it's sometimes hard to tell whether these game clips detailing expert techniques for *Viewtiful Joe* and *God Hand* are there to inform, entertain or just stun their viewers into states of depressed envy, it's a step away from the cut-and-paste walkthrough towards something more like a gaming masterclass. Schultz feels that this trend is likely to be around for some time: "There are videos of super-quick runthroughs that taught me a lot more about games I've played – and written guides for – than I could've picked up with my own observations, which is humbling. When you see people on YouTube cranking out quick runthroughs for tough, bizarre games like *Atlantis No Nazo* or even doing crazy things with *Tecmo Super Bowl*, you have to tip your hat to them." Beatty has his own thoughts: "We have just completed our guide to *PES6*. It comes with a free DVD that contains footage of moves, shots, tricks and techniques, plus an exclusive interview with *PES* creator Seabass. I think that this is a first and in some ways indicates the kind of innovation we might see over the coming months and years."



ASCII art, either hand-crafted or automatically generated, define the look of FAQs, like these examples by Dark Vortex/A.K.A and Atom Edge

incidental information, Piggyback's guides stand out, not just when compared to walkthroughs, but most other professional guides as well. And as for competition, Beatty believes that his guides are catering for a different market than FAQs in the first place: "We see our guides as companion to the games – an extension of the game." The company's recent guide for *Tomb Raider Legend* is a case in point: while it covers strategies for each level and detailed lists of unlockables, it also has time to include concept drawings, interviews with the developers, information on elements cut from the finished game, and an overview of the entire *Tomb Raider* series. It's a good read in itself, illuminating the game rather than simply 'beating' it.

Working closely with game developers on a regular basis, Beatty doesn't feel that the availability of FAQs are having any influence on the ways that games are made, and also suggests that the sheer amount of them in circulation cannot be explained simply by gamers getting stuck. He sees FAQs as "more an indication of the great enthusiasm there is for games, in particular for large, complex games. People like to write about games, to communicate about games. I would see this community as enthusiasts. We do not have much direct contact with them but we are aware of their views on games and guides." And if FAQ writers have to deal with plagiarism on a regular basis, Piggyback often finds scans of its books appearing on the forums of sites such as GameFAQs, too.

But professional guides alone can never completely cover the gaming spectrum. Piggyback, with its strict quality control, produces just four books a year. Even companies like Brady publish only 140. And no publisher is ever going to make a guide for a title nobody likes – something FAQ writers like Dan Engel love doing: "I like writing for really terrible or ridiculous games sometimes, just to find out what they're like and share the experience." While understandable, it's a proposal that would be unlikely to go down well at any forthcoming Prima strategy meeting.

In a perfect world, all developers would support hints for their games as well as companies like Revolution or Oddworld Inhabitants did. Equally, all guides would probably be as beautiful and complete as those made by Piggyback. But does that mean that, in a perfect world, there would be no more space for FAQs?

Unlikely. Maybe the most intriguing thing that FAQs suggest is that gaming is contagious – it infects everything it interacts with. With their bounty boards, competitions, rivalries, and cooperation, the whole subculture of FAQs has become something that looks uncannily like a game itself, with the authors often getting as much out of the experience as the readers do. It's a reciprocal relationship, the kind that could only evolve naturally. And as games get increasingly complex, our reliance on these tiny text files is only likely to increase.

The impossible game



While the user-created nature of much of EA's *Spore* will present a new challenge to FAQers, it also represents a new opportunity, driving demand for exhaustive how-to guides and creator tips It will be interesting to see if the emphasis of such FAQs shifts from beating the game to inspiring and aiding the creative process

FAQ writers have covered a bewildering array of games, creating guides for titles like *Tetris* and *Mario's Picross* alongside more conventional games like *Jak & Daxter*. But is there such a thing as a game that can't be covered? Andrew Schultz thinks not: "I don't think there are games that preclude walkthroughs. Well, sports games in the strict sense of the word probably need just FAQs. Their guides are less deterministic. Some games may be better off with maps, and GameFAQs did the right thing in accepting them. Often it may be more instructive to have a simple map or even a clip of how to win." Sulpher agrees: "Some games are too random for a step-by-step approach. But you can lay out general strategies and some step-by-step strategies to get players further along than they could on their own." Eagleson suggests that the future, with procedurally generated games and a focus on 'chemistry set' experiences, will test writers: "It has been suggested that one alternative to rising development costs in the gaming industry is to create games which almost allow the player to build the game themselves. *Spore* is an example of this – the designers lay out the building blocks of a universe, and allow the player to create it. While there will always be content to write about, I think that coming up with a way to document how to play these games will be one of the biggest challenges."









RPGs are the raison d'etre for the majority of FAQs, whether it's the complex *Disgaea 2* (left), the indie *Maple Story* (middle) or the expansive *Oblivion*

THE LEGEND OF LINK

Nintendo's never-ending story is facing a revolution. We look back at two decades of excellence, before sitting down for the first full hands-on with Twilight Princess

It's not the best selling series of all time – its siblings *Mario* and *Pokémon* leave it in the dust, *Final Fantasy* dwarfs it, and *GTA* will soon eclipse it. It's not without its secret shames – few look back fondly on the Phillips CD-i games, and many still chafe at the side-scrolling battles of *Zelda II: The Adventures of Link*. It's not even the most consistently high-scoring game in **Edge**'s history; its average may hold steady at nine, but it's *Pro Evo* that's never dropped below that score. Yet for 20 years it has stood as a benchmark of brilliance. Technically accomplished, mechanically meticulous, artistically ambitious and emotionally engaging, the *Zelda* games have themselves become the stuff of legend – the holy grail of game design.

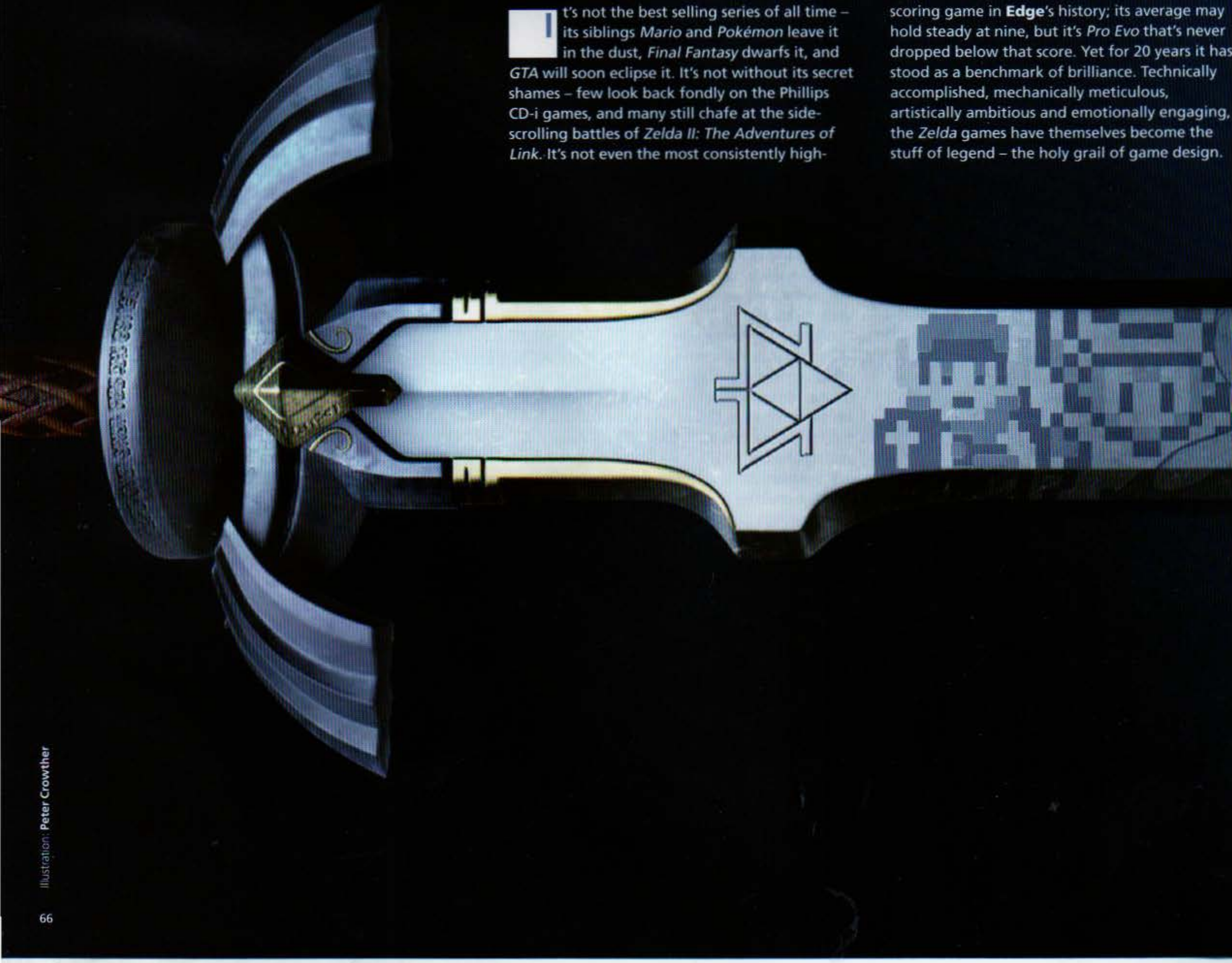


Illustration: **Peter Crowther**



But does the series deserve its reputation? And if it does, how has it earned its position as the best-regarded of all game franchises? And, more soberingly, as Nintendo adds the finishing flourishes to *Twilight Princess*, has that brilliance already run its course?

If you had to sum up Nintendo in two words, and by some rule-book quirk both 'Shigeru' and 'Miyamoto' were out of bounds, the words you would choose would be 'Mario' and 'Zelda'. And you would pick them not because they represent the company's most famous games (especially since these days Pikachu, Wario and even Kawashima would give them a run for their money) but because they represent the twin instincts that have made Nintendo the most consistently successful games company since the industry began. These days we have academic terms for them, but 20 years ago enraptured gamers didn't know – didn't need to know – that their Famicoms were playing host to the first professor of ludology and the first professor of narratology. All they knew was that Mario was pure play: cause and effect, action and reaction, victory and death. And Link was pure adventure: a world to explore, a girl to save, an evil to defeat. Together, they've towered over every game Nintendo has made since, ensuring – where they could – that each finds its own balance between the playful and the poignant, the structure and the setting.

And that difference in approach between the two games has played a huge part in determining Zelda's reputation. Mario is in it for laughs, whooping and crowing as he bowls along. You can almost sense his relief each time Bowser steps up to the plate and gives him an excuse to do it all again. But for Link, it's for real. He embarks on his adventure with the utter solemnity only a six-year-old can command. He's determination personified, able to express himself only in grunts of effort and fierce cries of victory. And that gravitas is infectious. If it's serious for him, then it's serious for you. It means that *Zelda* has always been a game that's treated with respect. Playing a new instalment for the first time is something to be done with care. You turn down the lights and sit dead centre – 20 years ago you banished your brat of a little brother, these days you switch off your phone. There's nothing quite like the moment just before you press the power button; nothing quite like the moment just *after*.



Uniquely, the first *Zelda* feels more like a regression of the modern games than vice versa; it's impossible not to think of octoroks in full 3D



There isn't a vast amount of *Zelda* merchandise: a towel, some dolls and watches, and this 1989 Game & Watch











MARIO WAS PURE PLAY. LINK WAS PURE ADVENTURE: A WORLD TO EXPLORE, A GIRL TO SAVE, AN EVIL TO DEFEAT

What's interesting about that reverence is that it's something the series' designers have shared. It's such a familiar facet of Link's identity that it's worth taking the time to consider Nintendo's extraordinary restraint in how he's used. It's a company whose attitude to its characters is usually reminiscent of that of vintage MGM to its child stars, and means that Mario is as at home on bank statements and lunchboxes as he is on kart tracks, tennis courts and typing tutorials. But Link's CV is almost completely clean. A stint in *Soul Calibur II* – purely for training purposes, you understand – and a standing *Smash Bros* engagement are all that take his attention away from the Triforce. And, outside of games, the story is much the same. Barring the notoriously excruciating – and notoriously short-lived – cartoon incarnation which ran as part of The Super Mario Bros Super Show ('Well excuuuuuse me, Princess!' being his most celebrated line), and a respectable enough series of manga which closely follow the game's plots, Link has been left in peace. And it's not hard to see why: what bank would want to risk incurring his wrath by emblazoning him all over a sneaky late payment charge?

It's this purity of purpose which has always been one of the pillars of the *Zelda* games. The others are harder to define – in part because they're so obvious, and in part because they're so subtle. The obvious thing is the excellence. Although Miyamoto's name is most often associated with the series, it's the work of men

A HISTORY OF THE HERO OF TIME

Hat, sword, shield: Link's wardrobe may not have changed in twenty years, but his world has. Here – and there are more than you might think – are the key moments in his evolution so far.



THE LEGEND OF ZELDA
FORMAT: **NES**
RELEASE: **1986**



ZELDA II: THE ADVENTURE OF LINK
FORMAT: **NES**
RELEASE: **1987**



THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: A LINK TO THE PAST
FORMAT: **SNES**
RELEASE: **1991**





A Link To The Past (left) is usually regarded as the most intricate Zelda, but almost every incarnation has its real sticking points

like composer Koji Kondo, original collaborator Takashi Tezuka and current director Eiji Aonuma that have shaped its details with such care and creativity. It took *Ocarina Of Time*'s 3D shift to show the completeness of the visual imagination the game had had from the start: go back in time and you can see each piece of that game's grandeur compressed first into 16bit and then into 8bit. The characterisations are always deft, the animation always impeccable. The dungeon and puzzle designs are masterclasses, pored over as intently by players as by rival designers. Technically the games excel, pushing innovations from the original's pioneering battery save, to *Ocarina*'s Z-targeting and *Majora's Mask*'s suspend-save system. It's enough to ensure that things like the combat system – as crisp and compelling in *A Link To The Past* as it is in the 3D games – get largely overlooked. And it means that when the games fall short of brilliance, as later sections of *The Wind Waker* showed they can, it feels like a betrayal. When they plummet to the depths of mere charming competency, like the highly enjoyable *Oracle Of Ages* and *Seasons* games (made by Flagship, under Capcom and Nintendo's supervision), they are often dismissed out of hand.

And that dazzle can make it hard to discern the other values which have allowed *The Legend Of Zelda*, for two decades, to dominate the fastest evolving medium ever created. One is surprising: *Zelda* is hard. These games are long, complex and challenging – and that challenge is often cerebral and unforgiving. The thought of the Water Temple still brings a dull ache to the back-brain of many *Ocarina* veterans, but even in two dimensions the switch puzzles Link faced are as effective an IQ test as many would ever want to tackle. They're scary, too – there's a genuine dark horror in your first baffling trip to the Dark World of *A Link To The Past*, and the eerie awfulness of *Majora's Mask*'s climax is unforgettably unsettling. But here's the strangest secret of *Zelda*'s success: it's always the same.

It seems an odd idea – the screenshots on these pages show the gulf from the



THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: LINK'S AWAKENING
FORMAT: **GAME BOY**
RELEASE: **1993**



LINK: THE FACES OF EVIL
FORMAT: **CD-i**
RELEASE: **1993**



ZELDA: THE WAND OF GAMELON
FORMAT: **CD-i**
RELEASE: **1993**



ZELDA'S ADVENTURE
FORMAT: **CD-i**
RELEASE: **1993**

monochrome sprites of *Link's Awakening* to the vibrant swirls of *The Wind Waker*. And although the stories are often superficially the same, their resolution depends on wildly different mechanics, as Link time-travels, shape-shifts and deep-sea dives his way to victory. And yet the reason that turning on a new *Zelda* game for the first time has become so ritualistic is precisely because we've been through all this before. The litany of bombs, arrows and bottles; the sense of a separate world existing in parallel to the one that can be seen; the unlit torches, the unpushed blocks, the still-dormant statues. Debate rages over the true chronology of the *Zelda* universe, and over the real relationship of each Link to the next, but that misses the point. *Zelda* is a legend, a single tale that grows in each telling but never loses its shape. There's a very precisely calculated degree of solidity about it: just enough to guarantee it's always recognisable but not enough to make it predictable.

And central to that calculation is The Hero of Time. Link is at once utterly unmistakable – the great big pennant of a hat, the dorky hair, the awful tights – and entirely unknowable: silent, often orphaned or abandoned, nameless even,







until you christen him correctly or commit a churlish sacrilege and enter something else. And that name, of course, is the greatest one-word design document ever written: link. The great choice in designing game avatars is whether you let the player create their own representative in the world or have them play the part of someone who's been formed to serve the story. *Zelda* simply dissolves that conundrum with a piece of character design so perfectly weighted it might as well be on gimbals. It's impossible to answer the question of whether Link is your avatar or you his puppeteer, because the games so impeccably align the desires of both player and character. When Sheik disappears in a puff of smoke high in the craters of *Ocarina*'s Fire Mountain, a cutscene shows Link race the last few yards to try reach him before he vanishes.

world, or whose story is so compelling you forget that you're playing a game. *Zelda* is a great rarity in that it does both.

So if all that's needed to qualify as the greatest game series of all time is excellence, then *Zelda* makes a compelling case. But shouldn't it take more? Shouldn't there be a sense of significance, of wider impact? And in this respect, there's another *Zelda* anomaly. Because, for such a well-regarded game, and a strong commercial performer, *Zelda* has had weirdly little impact. The games industry is usually quick to clone, for better or worse, games that have success, but *Zelda* has surprisingly few imitators, failed or otherwise. Capcom's *Okami*, reviewed on p78, is perhaps the first to mount a serious attempt, and its achievements serve as an object lesson in just

THE GAMES INDUSTRY IS USUALLY QUICK TO CLONE, BUT ZELDA HAS SURPRISINGLY FEW IMITATORS

Except, when you look down, you realised you've instinctively pushed the control stick forward to take the same few steps. The game erases the tension between your desire to interact and its need to tell a story by manipulating its players so minutely that those two impulses naturally overlap. 'Immersion' is a word that's often overused – not least because it's never clear whether it means a game which absorbs you so effectively you forget the outside

what makes *Zelda* so uncopyable: scale. *Zelda*'s hallmarks – the vast overworld, the heavily populated and secret-packed villages, the distinct dungeons which each require their own visual style and puzzle system – protect it from copycats the way a banknote's dense, detailed elaborations do. You can copy it, but it's such a daunting, demanding job that the only people able to tackle it are those capable enough to pursue their own visions instead. And so while



THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: OCARINA OF TIME
FORMAT: **N64**
RELEASE: **1998**



THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: MAJORA'S MASK
FORMAT: **N64**
RELEASE: **2000**



THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: ORACLE OF AGES
FORMAT: **GBC**
RELEASE: **2001**

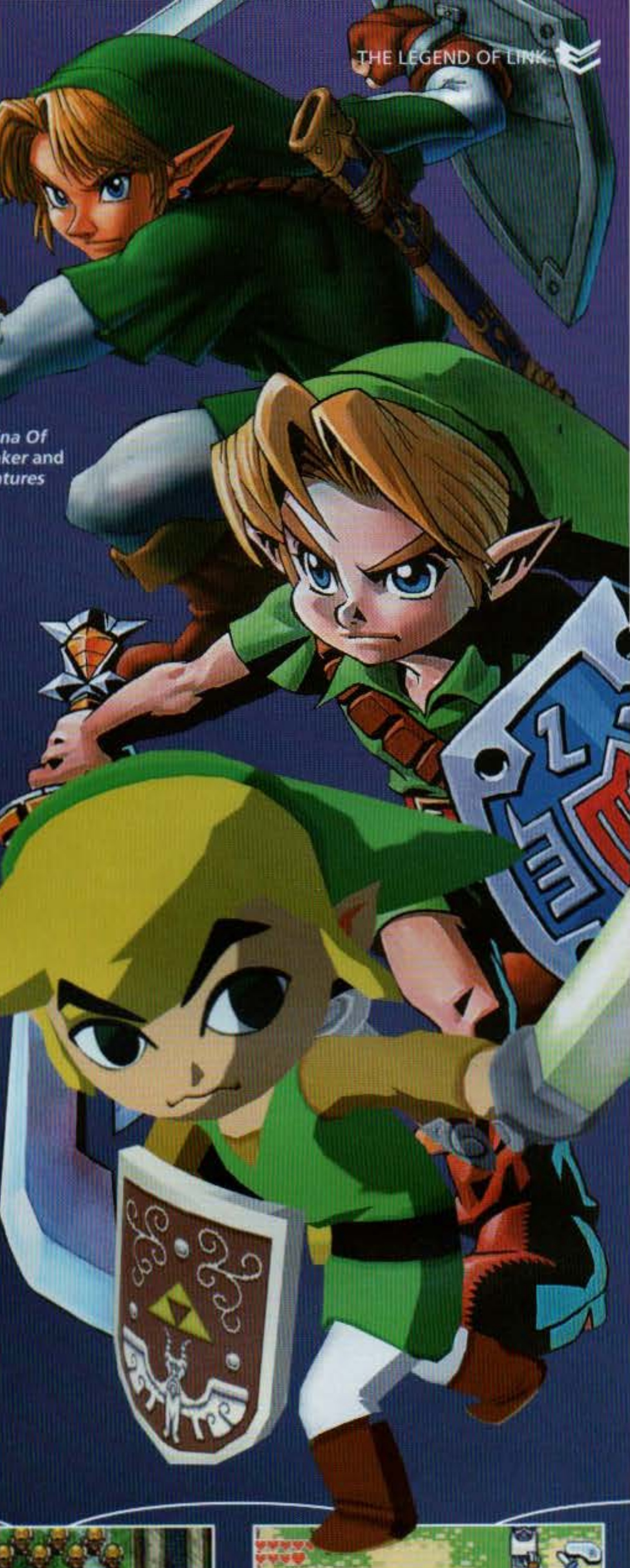


THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: ORACLE OF SEASONS
FORMAT: **GBC**
RELEASE: **2001**





(Left to right) *Ocarina Of Time*, *The Wind Waker* and *Four Swords Adventures*



some *Zelda* elements – most notably Z-targeting – have become commonplace others – the automatic jump, *Majora*'s two-track save system, its overall structure – are left largely untouched.

But where *Zelda* does have larger significance is as a barometer of Nintendo's mentality. Charting Link's adventures also charts the evolution of a company whose relentless innovation is overlooked as often as its systematic profiteering, its reputation dominated instead by the bouncy, dopey face of Mario. But what gets lost in the noise of the plumber's plump back catalogue (close now to 150 games), is clearer to see in Link's legends: the CDi games, with their dismal animation and the unappetising opportunity to play as Zelda, grew out of Nintendo's switch to Phillips as a CD-ROM partner after the breakdown of the relationship with Sony which lead to the birth of the PlayStation. The release of remixed versions of the first and third games on the pioneering Satellavision system in Japan mark the time when Nintendo – so often thought of as lagging behind in the online game – was broadcasting downloadable versions of old games a decade before Wii Channels – or Live Arcade – had even been thought of. The involvement of Capcom on *Oracle Of Ages* and *Seasons*, and *Four Swords Adventures*, is emblematic of the period when tough market conditions meant that Nintendo's attitude of glorious isolationism towards the rest of the Japanese development industry had to evolve – a shift which also brought about the repair of the previously un-mendable relationship with Square Enix. Link even stands as the perfect emblem for the time when the newly promoted Iwata, responding to mounting criticism that Nintendo released too few games, too rarely, encouraged a new approach which left both *The Wind Waker* and *Mario Sunshine* short of the exhaustive refinement which had made their N64 predecessors so exceptional to play, and so time-consuming to create.

And it's this aspect of *Zelda* which makes *Twilight Princess* so tantalising a prospect. There has never been a *Zelda* like it. *Zelda* games represent the pinnacle of their hardware's achievements, and yet *Twilight Princess* is a launch game. There has only ever been one defining *Zelda* game each generation, and yet *Twilight Princess* was conceived as the third GameCube take on the title. *Zelda* games are entirely at odds with the Wii's manifesto – complex, demanding, time-consuming, reliant on lavish visuals – and yet it's the only full game (*Wii Sports* and *Wii Play* notwithstanding) Nintendo has prepared for the launch of its new console. If *Twilight Princess* feels compromised or fudged on its new platform, it doesn't mean disaster for the Wii, but it does mean that the barometer is pointing to a demoralising reading: that Nintendo's new philosophy is at odds with the epic, elaborate delights – the gamer's games – that won the company residency in so many hearts. But if the tale unfolds with that same familiar, unpredictable brilliance, it means that Nintendo's heartland is secure for another generation. So which will it be? Read on for the first hands-on preview of the real *Twilight Princess*.



TLOZ: LINK'S AWAKENING DX/FOUR SWORDS
FORMAT: **GBA**
RELEASE: **2001**



TLOZ: THE WIND WAKER
FORMAT: **GAMECUBE**
RELEASE: **2003**



TLOZ: FOUR SWORDS ADVENTURE
FORMAT: **GAMECUBE**
RELEASE: **2004**



THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: THE MINISH CAP
FORMAT: **GBA**
RELEASE: **2005**

Light and dark, good and evil, order and chaos: hardly strange concepts to any *Zelda* game. But twice the series has taken them one step further, and served up two visions of the same world, showing Link, and us, exactly what it would mean should he fail, and how scary Hyrule can be – *A Link To The Past*'s twisted parallel dimension, the Dark World, and *Ocarina Of Time*'s desolate future under Ganondorf's rule.

Make that three times. *Twilight Princess* offers the Twilight realm, a Hyrule surrendered by Zelda to the unstoppable might of the Twilight King. It's a world of shadows whose every inhabitant has been reduced to a fearful ghost, where tentacle-headed monsters drop from the sky and where Link is transformed not into a man – he's that already – but an animal, a prowling wolf. We're thrust into it mere hours after the game starts, before we've even ventured far from Link's home of Ordon village. The message is clear. This time Nintendo has made a game that is unafraid to stand tall beside those two previous titles, widely regarded as the greatest in a series of greats. This is no 'what if?' whimsy like *The Wind Waker* or *The Minish Cap*. *Twilight Princess* is *Zelda* by the book, and there's every sign that it's the most involved, the most ambitious, the just plain biggest *Zelda* there's ever been.

The sheer amount of content in *Twilight Princess* is overwhelming. It throws new skills, new items and intriguing twists at you far faster than any *Zelda* before it. By the time you've got to know the village and made your first foray into the neighbouring Faron Woods, you've learned not just the basics of combat and interaction but also horse-riding – Link's trusty steed Epona returns from the N64 games, and is no slender pony this time but a gigantic, solid, invincible animal. You've acquired a fishing rod (and caught a few fish), a slingshot (and honed your aim) plus, in a sweet throwback to 2D *Zelda*s, a lantern to light your way and set fires. And you've discovered Link's ability to summon animals. If he plucks a horseshoe-shaped reed he can blow that familiar air on it and bring Epona to his side, and there are also bird-shaped reeds in Ordon village that call a hawk to his arm, which can then be aimed and launched at bees' nests or thieving monkeys.

It's more than you'd expect before the third dungeon of most *Zelda*s, let alone the first, and we haven't even got to the real exposition yet. After rescuing a couple of children and a mischievous monkey from the moblins in the woods, Link is due to make his first trip to Hyrule bearing gifts for the royal family (a sword and a shield, of course). But before he can get away, moblins attack astride giant boars, abducting Link-worshipping lad Colin and Mayor's daughter Ilia, and a shadow beast drags Link into the Twilight, transforming him into a wolf. He wakes chained up in the sewers of what turns out to be the shattered, shrouded ruin of Hyrule Castle, and escapes with the help of a bizarre, sardonic imp named Midna.

Midna is a shadow being and seems to belong to, even to love, the Twilight, but she can and does accompany Link back to the light in ephemeral form, occupying a Navi-like role as tipster and taskmistress. In her realm, though, she and wolf-Link become one character; she can guide him in successions of huge leaps with Z-targeting and the A button, or surround him with a circular energy field that kills several of the frightening shadow beasts at once (necessary, or they will just revive each other). The purpose of the spectral hand that leaps from her head isn't yet clear. Her interjections are barbed and her haunting, echoing chatter – her giggles emanating from the Wii Remote's speaker, could well be the audio signature of an already superb soundtrack (the music we've heard is up there with the very best in any *Zelda*, veering into ominous, synthesised abstraction when in Twilight). She is a bewitching creation.



THIS TIME NINTENDO HAS MADE A GAME UNAFRAID TO STAND TALL BESIDE THOSE TITLES REGARDED AS THE GREATEST



THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: TWILIGHT PRINCESS
FORMAT: **GAMECUBE/Wii**
RELEASE: **2006**



TLOZ: PHANTOM HOURGLASS
FORMAT: **DS**
RELEASE: **2007**













As a wolf, Link controls almost exactly as he does in human form; every attack has its equivalent. Dashing with A instigates a burst of speed, and though he cannot access items, D-pad shortcuts allow him to dig and use his senses. Sensing instantly darkens the view – even if you're already in the smoky, purpled gloom of Twilight – into a tight, grainy, monochromatic circle that reveals digging spots, light-eating shadow insects and the ethereal, mournful spirits of Hyrule's citizens, who will talk, but only to themselves. Sense effectively opens up another world again, a twilight within the Twilight, and its puzzle potential is immense.

Link's first adventure as a wolf takes him to meet Zelda's cowled figure, who recognises the 'blue-eyed beast' as Hyrule's saviour, and confesses how she succumbed to the Twilight King. He then returns to the village, which isn't under Twilight, suggesting he will spend time in the light world as a wolf too. There, people fear him but he can talk to animals – yet another layer of existence to add to the pile. Finally, he brings the newly twilit Faron Woods back from the netherworld by hunting down shadow insects and collecting the tears of light they've consumed, restoring one of four great Light Spirits – which are essentially this game's Great Fairies. The spirit returns Link to human form – or rather to hero form, because only then does he acquire the signature green tunic and hat – and only then does this latest *Legend Of Zelda* truly get underway.

We'll say less about the Forest Temple dungeon that follows, and which rounded off our time with the game, partly because it's largely familiar from last year's GameCube E3 demo and partly because *Zelda* dungeons should always be gaming's best-kept secrets. Suffice to say that it introduces the boomerang, that Link is aided by a team of monkeys (the animal world makes its presence felt at every

From top: Midna bends wolf-Link's ear; swordfights no longer have the frame-stops and musical stabs of *Wind Waker*; wolf-Link restores the great Light Spirit Ordona (yes, it is a giant transcendental goat). Main image: wolf-Link's senses reveal the sad population of Twilight

turn in this game) and that, though hardly hard, it's probably as involved and surprising as any other initial *Zelda* dungeon, if not more so. Also worthy of note is a highly unusual character called Ooccoo – a chicken homunculus with a human head – who appears in dungeons, takes residence in your inventory and allows you to warp out and return to exactly the same spot, should you need supplies.

Oh, and one more thing. The sacred treasure the dungeon yields is one of three; this suggests an Ocarina-style structure to us, with a trio of dungeons prefacing a second, grander quest. Consider that the route to the end of that dungeon is much longer and systematically much more involved than that to the end of *Ocarina*'s Deku Tree, and you begin to get a sense of the sheer, dizzying scope of *Twilight Princess*. It threatens to be absolutely immense, an epic seldom rivalled in scale outside of the RPG form (and never by another launch game), and loaded heavier than ever with details, equipment, possibilities as yet unseen in a test that made six hours feel like six minutes. (Remember the horseback combat, the game-in-its-own-right fishing, the flight sections in the latest trailer…)

It's almost forbidding. *Twilight Princess* is certainly no populist rethink of *Zelda*, in tune with the cuddly, all-access Wii. It is, instead, a determined, all-guns-blazing assault on the hardcore, a fanboy's wet dream (if there's a worry at all, it's that it may overburden itself with its kitchen-sink approach and leave some of its myriad possibilities under-exploited). That's reflected in the involved controls of the Wii version, which does not offer GameCube pad support. Though not as off-putting as they seemed in the deep-end E3 demo, when introduced gradually and relaxed into over time they are delicate, sometimes demanding and occasionally frustrating; attack gestures flow beautifully but are sticky to start, and jumping to pointer-aiming can be awkward and disorienting. However, they more than make up





A year or two on, *TP* isn't quite the beauty it once seemed. Some textures are rough and the framerate suggests the engine hasn't been uprated for Wii. But it didn't matter in *OOT*, and it certainly doesn't now

for it with tremendous tactile excitement, the shrill thrill of the speaker effects, and the very real and seriously welcome freedom and comfort that comes from having your hands linked by three feet of wire, not three inches of plastic. Factor in the Wii-only widescreen support – no small consideration – and it's clear which version is the must-have.

Six hours with a new *Zelda* game is always going to raise as many questions as it answers. Is the Twilight a parallel world or merely a present threat that's cleared as you progress? Will Link ever be able to move between the planes and his two forms at will or, as in these early stages, only when the plot triggers it? But the questions it does answer are the more important ones. Is it a challenge? Is it a mystery? Will it make your heart stop? Is it *Zelda*?

Yes, yes, yes, and yes.



















The art style may be less controversial than *Wind Waker's*, but the design still has its quirks. The effect is rich, but not as consistent or as well animated

Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

Setting Santa straight
If you only buy one console this Christmas...



Who knows what moogles, especially those as well-appointed as the ones in *Final Fantasy XII* ask for at Christmas. Do they even wear socks?

Will there be enough Wiis? Would you regret importing a PlayStation 3? Does the announcement of the HD-DVD drive mean it's finally time to follow Microsoft's exhortations to jump in? One of the great horrors of Christmas may be that it starts earlier every year, but as a gamer one of the enduring pleasures is the possibilities of that oblong box under the tree. The shape may change, and the weight may increase, but there's no wrapping paper in the world thick enough to hide the glow that only new hardware brings. But this year, the choice seems tougher than usual.

So what if instead of agonising over the possibilities outlined above you went for something a little different? What if you could find, tucked in the back of the shop, a console as slender as it is silent – reasonably priced and handsome to look at. What if it played games that you couldn't get anywhere else and offered sound multi-media support, motion sensitive peripherals and an inclusive software line-up which makes Nintendo's Touch Generation games look old hat?

Why, in other words, would you ask Santa for anything other than a PS2? The simple answer is that you've already got one, of course, but the principle remains. The idea that a console's dying days are a golden age is a cliche, but the PS2 elevates it to a tenet of faith. This month, the extraordinary *Okami* and the anarchic *Canis Canem Edit* arrive to show that the machine can do more and show more than you previously thought possible, and *God Hand* barrels into town to show what happens when a familiar friend is let off the leash. *Yakuza* may have already earned itself a permanent place in your collection, and over the months to come *Final Fantasy XII*, *Rogue Galaxy* and *God Of War II* will stake their claims. The new machines may be able to give truly new experiences, but never before has the outgoing technology proved so able to hold its own.

And why isn't the PC earning consideration for our Christmas list? Perhaps because it's more of an ongoing investment than a single present, and perhaps because its complexity still means hiccups: a last-minute problem with *Dark Messiah*'s code means this review will appear shortly on Edge Online, and then in **E**170. Our apologies.

Edge's most played

World Of WarCraft



Sleep deprivation and workplace absence are the real-world results of a new *WOW* addiction. If you manage to win duels and level up it's all worth it, though. Isn't it?
MAC, BLIZZARD

Yakuza



With Kazuma's story concluded – for now, at least – it's time to return to the game's immense selection of bonus scraps, and soak up the essence of brawling
PS2, SEGA

Rez



A train journey spent with *Lumines* leads to the deflowering of a *Rez* virgin. Just one evening later, and the obsession is are already making itself felt – and seen, and heard
PS2, SEGA

Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three, 4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven, 8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten



OKAMI

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: $50 (£27) DEVELOPER: CLOVER STUDIO
RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), JANUARY (UK) PUBLISHER: CAPCOM
PREVIOUSLY IN: E151, E152, E163



Amaterasu is a potent character, despite a complete lack of anthropomorphism. Its animations are an acute study of canine behaviour, while the sense of godlike power that surrounds it (and follows in a train of flowers) is palpable

Epic is a word that's often applied to games, to convey size, length and dramatic scale. In that sense, *Okami* is certainly an epic: a luxuriously long, physically vast adventure peppered with side-quests, minigames and micro-comedies, and with a cast of hundreds. But *Okami* is an epic in another sense too, in the precise, literary meaning of the word. It follows neither a single narrative arc nor a logical gaming structure. It is a rambling, episodic tale, by turns grand and nonsensical, crude and beautiful: a hero's journey that continues long after its three acts appear to be over. It is one of the great videogame legends, and it owes much – though not everything – to that other one, *The Legend Of Zelda*.

> A breathless, headlong rush of new sights and pleasures that just keep coming long after you think they must surely dry up

Considering *Zelda*'s towering reputation and popularity, it's been a persistent mystery how few games have tried to reverse-engineer its magic formula: most would-be competitors end up falling heavily either side of its delicate action-RPG balance. *Okami* doesn't just successfully follow *Zelda*'s structural template and tone – a rare feat – it makes it its own, toeing that line with grace, ingenuity and a strongly individual style. That's not only rare, it's unique.



Combat is initiated by running into a floating demon scroll – after that, it's hemmed in by coruscating walls, although an escape can be effected at the cost of godhood (effectively a shield, earned from combos). It's not clear if this was a technical or design restriction, but either way, it works

Like recent *Zeldas*, *Okami* frames itself as a repeat of previous events, a legend come back to life. A wolf and a warrior from a cursed village defeated the evil dragon Orochi 100 years ago; now, as Orochi is reawakened and places a life-sapping blight on the land of Nippon, a sacred tree spirit reincarnates the sun goddess Amaterasu in the body of the same legendary wolf to cleanse the land and defeat the dragon. The wolf is paired with Issun, a garrulous sprite – an even more insistent, but in the long run far more endearing, version of Navi – who acts as guide, tutor, interpreter and comic relief for the silent goddess.

And so, after a lengthy introduction and tutorial, the adventure starts to unfold in an familiar pattern of exploration, combat, towns and dungeons, poignant and comical NPC interaction, and of course, an exquisitely-paced drip-feed of new abilities that unlock and unravel the secrets of *Okami*'s pastoral universe. But it would be more productive to discuss the ways *Okami* is unlike *Zelda* than to sketch out a shape most players will already know by heart.

For all its structural similarity, and despite its own spurs and diversions, *Okami* is a much more linear game. Where *Zelda* unfolds spatially, *Okami* is arranged as a sequence of events. You are always free to explore, but a channelled and irresistibly strong narrative current keeps pulling you back, following a path that may double back on itself but never splits. This design is rather unnecessarily reinforced with some less-than-graceful hand-holding and hint-dropping. It's also apparent in the 'dungeons', which are atmospheric and beautifully staged, but slender challenges. It's limiting – it can even curb your curiosity when you know that if a mystery is important enough, you'll be brought back there – but also exhilarating, quickening the pace of the adventure to a breathless, headlong rush of new sights and pleasures that just keep coming long after you think they must surely dry up.

And what sights they are. *Okami*'s breathtaking visual style has been discussed







There are three levels for the three weapon styles – sword, reflector and the whiplike rosary, which all have different properties if equipped in the secondary slot (ink bullets, ranged attacks, defensive moves, etc). Identifying brushwork finishing moves is also important, as these earn you fangs, which are exchangeable for rare items



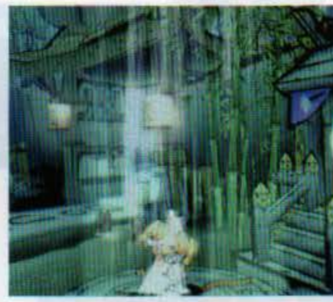




Running the most beautiful game in the world on the least powerful console on the market has to come at a cost: there is slowdown (very occasional and light), pop-up (or rather, fade-in: heavy, but gracefully handled), and perhaps most disappointingly, no widescreen option. Frankly, we would have paid any price









There's a wealth of detail to *Okami*'s world, and you'll find yourself very grateful for the game's comprehensive log book, which tracks your quests, records treasure and techniques collected and enemies fought, and via the collectable travel scrolls is a source of genuinely enlightening tips

and admired, from artistic and technical standpoints, ever since it was first seen running, but that still can't prepare you for how it deeply has saturated the game, soaking into every aspect of it like the thick blacks and delicate pastels soak into its faux-parchment backing. It has inspired character design and animation of rare quality, demanded a proud focus on traditional Japanese culture and myth where so many action-RPGs slip into a frothy blend of eastern and western fantasy, and conjured true lyricism from the landscapes. It makes the game feel truly ancient and magical when, in videogames, magic is commonplace and the old routinely appears brand new. Above all, it dovetails perfectly with *Okami*'s primary, distinguishing game mechanic, the divine brushwork techniques.

These are the boldest statement in the game design, and also the most brilliant, surpassing even Link's ocarina in sophistication, feedback and creative pleasure (if not quite imagination). Amaterasu can conjure or transpose elements, change night into day and vice versa, strike enemies, place bombs and heal nature by pausing time and drawing on the screen with surprisingly firm and fluid brushstrokes. Instead of removing you from the world as some other gesture systems do, it gives you a strong physical connection with it, whether you're slicing a demon in half or painting around trees and on the ground to heal the land in intoxicating riots of colour. These acts and others – feeding animals, solving problems – earn worship as well as money; worship can be spent on enhancing Amaterasu's attributes. That's a light swing to the RPG end of the spectrum that is perfectly counterbalanced by the combat, which may be triggered and contained like an RPG battle, but is pure Capcom combo action. Semi-tactical – with choices of weapons in primary and secondary slots, as well as the brush – it's very easy to survive, the challenge coming from executing enemies in as efficient and stylish a manner as possible.

Straightforward and linear as it is, there's a nagging fear as you play that *Okami* will never solidify into the monumental adventure you want it to be; it will be as fluid and ephemeral as its ravishing sensory rewards, and simply dissolve in your hands. That fear becomes acute when you fight and defeat Orochi, but that, stunningly, is when the game – some 15 or more hours in – starts all over again, throws out the need to build to a climax, and settles into its true form: a series of gloriously surreal, disconnected episodes, an outlandish string of twists and surprises, colourful characters and impossible missions.

That's when you forget about wanting it to get harder and concentrate solely on wishing *Okami* will never end. And it never seems to. This is the game that just keeps on giving, new powers, new places, new people, new spectacle, and the same wondrous tide of colour and happiness washing out of the screen wherever you go and whatever you do, for dozens and dozens of hours. Clover and director Hideki Kamiya's generosity of spirit is as faultless as their artistry, and they've created an epic that is more than worthy of its inspiration. **[9]**



Few quests in games are as righteous and rewarding. Feeding animals to earn their love, triggering a soft-focus interlude, is the game's most outrageously sweet touch

Dig dog



***Okami*'s foremost minigame is quite a surprise: a 2D digging exercise in vintage arcade style, in which Amaterasu must accompany a human to the bottom of a pit, guiding them past hazards with brushstrokes, and digging through, breaking up or exploding various kinds of blocks to reach the bottom, and your companion will identify the way out. Time limits are tight, and ink will run low on harder levels. The game is sometimes optional but sometimes a requirement of the main quest, putting it firmly under the spotlight quality-wise, but it's a solid and rewarding little game and well up to the task.**



CANIS CANEM EDIT

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: £40 RELEASE: OCTOBER 27
PUBLISHER: ROCKSTAR GAMES
DEVELOPER: ROCKSTAR VANCOUVER PREVIOUSLY IN: E151, E168





Some minigames take place within the main game world (above), but some, like the *Wipeout* copycat, come lovingly presented in both top-down and fully 3D versions, played via a cronky old cabinet and a deluxe sit-in booth, respectively

While many games focus on expanding *GTA*'s free-roaming by opening up the freedom, *Canis Canem Edit* is the first to push things forward by holding back on the roaming. And there's perhaps no more organic a way to do it than through a constraint that's all too familiar to gamers of all ages and backgrounds: school. Jimmy Hopkins is Bullworth Academy's new kid, a roughhouser in a much rougher house, a boarding school that's a breeding pool for old boys and home to a register of maniacal teachers – washed-up, slimy or totalitarian – and a disgustingly grotty dinner lady.

> As proof that Rockstar has some kind of direct-line tap into pop culture that few can match, Bullworth Academy's ambience is remarkable

As proof that Rockstar has some kind of direct-line tap into pop culture that few others can match, Bullworth Academy's ambience is remarkable; many modern games have offered some kind of tick-tock social microcosm of pedestrians and authority figures, but this is an object lesson in how it's done. It's no more obvious than in the game's opening moments, as Jimmy, abandoned by his callous mother at the school gates, has to walk the gauntlet to the headmaster's office, approached and heckled with all manner of new-boy taunts by a playground that's alive with the merciless mischief of the high school food chain. Greasers doss by the garage, bullies and jocks take random shoves at geeks, while prefects roam the grounds, springing into action at the slightest misconduct. Later in the game, events such as Halloween and Christmas are rendered with equal dedication and detail.

No sooner has Jimmy settled into his uniform than the player is gets harassed with a wealth of activities: Locker breaking, foodfights, skateboarding, wrestling, dodgeball, fire alarms, errands, scraps, taunts, wedgies, anagram-based English lessons, tree climbing, Frisbee flinging, penalty shootouts, chats, confrontations, apologies, tips from a street-fighting hobo, button-prompt chemistry class, yearbook photography, dress code violations, firecrackers, stink bombs, bannister slides, kisses from girls – the game's opening area is jammed with content, from the engaging to the trivial. And then, a handful of missions later, the school gates swing open and another wave of activities spill forth in one of the most dizzying collections of minigames and distractions to hit PS2, a feature that successfully captures the possibilities of 15-year-old going about town. A carnival, a suburb, an industrial district and more – so much to do, but so little time to do it in, with the day's final bell generating a genuine feeling of teenage release as you venture out into a stomping ground that's only free-roaming for as long as the clock says it is. And it's an achievement that so much has been so consistently mapped to the joypad without it all falling apart.



Room-smashing and vermin-spraying have to fit in with Jimmy's timetable: lessons run from 9:30am to noon, and 1:30pm to 4pm, with an 11pm curfew. Attendance of lessons isn't forced, but prefects will be on the lookout for truants.









Five lessons in six subjects are offered, each one providing an upgrade in return for a passing grade. English lessons (above) are a simple but addictive vocabulary test for those with the willpower to avoid playing online anagram games











One of Hopkins' closest friends and allies, Gary, quickly becomes his nemesis, a black hole of mischief whose words and actions veer much closer to the bone than anything you'll be capable of. He'll vanish for whole chapters at a time, however, while you get acquainted with Bullworth's gangs (above)

Completing certain missions will add 'trophies' – 36 in all – to Hopkins' hangouts: a photo of a girl successfully wooed and so on. The clothing that can be unlocked and purchased is just as loving – expect to receive a dunce's cap for failing a few lessons

Even the missions, which are brief by design, are often multi-part minigames, occasionally dull but never exhausting. Failure can be frustrating, however, what with the tight timings of the daily schedule; but there's rarely a feeling of being left with nothing to play with. And there's even an eventual workaround – complete all five lessons of any of the six subjects up for study, and you can then skip that class without being wanted for truancy. The town and the rest of the environs outside of Bullworth Academy feel less captivating, but they're still busy with motorised life, and some smart and hard-working production values. But there's some roughness – the crowd soundbites that loop in the background of a boxing match, for example, grate much too quickly. And Hopkins' standing within each of the main schoolyard factions – geek, preppie, jock et al – feels like a pointless aspect, since it's controlled so heavily and often unpredictably by the game's story missions. On foot, or on a skateboard or a bike, tapping the X button results in maximum speed, a necessity considering the time limits in play, but something that quickly becomes irritating when it's so continually called for, and the handling itself feels sketchy.

It's a game that's way more *GTA* than PTA, a back-to-school education in how to take Rockstar's infamous template and cultivate it into something fresh. It's for grown-ups who've weathered an education and know the wickedness that kids can do, trading guns, GBH and drugs for slingshots, dead arms and bunches of flowers. It's utterly relentless in its provision of new activities and distractions to the point that it's hard not to become absorbed, a feeling backed up by the fact that most plot missions introduce a new location or interior environment to revisit and explore. Despite some must-try-harder slackness in a few places, Rockstar Vancouver's debut assignment is definitely deserving of extra credit. **[8]**



Stealth is handled tightly, and hiding in bins or lockers can give pursuers the slip. If you insist on sprinting away from trouble, your pursuers will run out of puff eventually

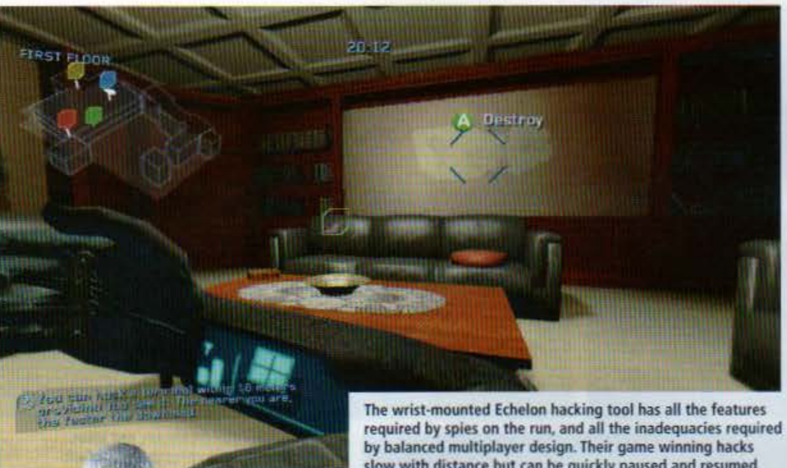
Breakfast clubs



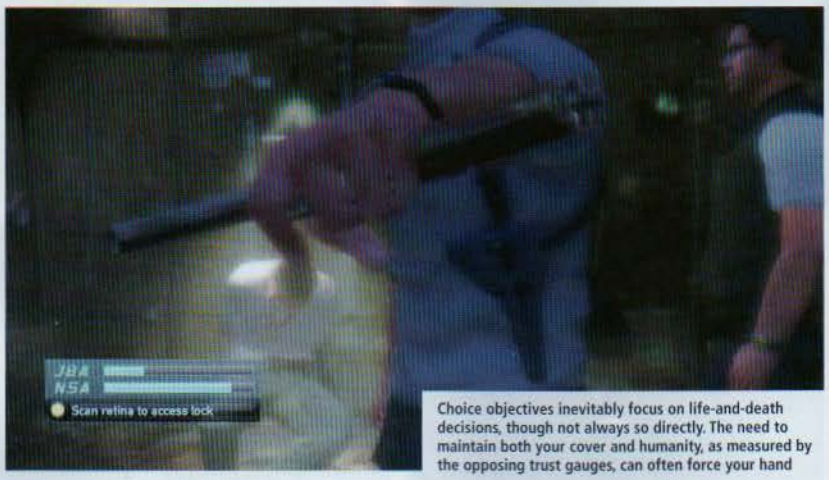
Bullworth Academy is home to several conventional high school factions that Hopkins loosely works through and with in each of the game's chapters. His wardrobe allows him to dress up to fit in, if needed, and throughout the game new safe-houses are unlocked by completing challenges issued by each gang. The nerds, for example, request you beat their high score on *ConSumo*, a 2D food-collection game where enemies and hazards get bigger as you do, and it's a great little arcade distraction. The reward is a new place to save, sleep, hang out or stock up on bottle rockets, not to mention the presence of a somewhat familiar logo used to decorate its walls...



Few missions in *Double Agent* seem rushed or ill-conceived, with each exploiting a more adventurous premise. But while the Congo level (right), teems with possibilities, the post-credits bonus mission is an absolute dog - a confined afterthought with psychic AI



The wrist-mounted Echelon hacking tool has all the features required by spies on the run, and all the inadequacies required by balanced multiplayer design. Their game winning hacks slow with distance but can be quickly paused and resumed



Choice objectives inevitably focus on life-and-death decisions, though not always so directly. The need to maintain both your cover and humanity, as measured by the opposing trust gauges, can often force your hand



SPLINTER CELL: DOUBLE AGENT

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), GC, PC, PS2, XBOX, Wii
PRICE: £50 (360), £35 (PC), £30 (GC, PS2, XBOX)
RELEASE: DECEMBER 8 PUBLISHER: UBISOFT
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE PREVIOUSLY IN: E158, E164, E168

Ninja theory



The apparent harmony between Ubisoft's mind-bogglingly diverse family of studios plays to the advantage of its flagship games. Again, *Splinter Cell's* co-op and deathmatch modes are separate yet related, designed for long-term endurance rather than back-of-box impact. *Double Agent's* online component is a predictably refined standalone, dynamic in its calendar of special events and prize-winning Live competitions. Its hierarchy of co-op missions, split into unique chapters but focused exclusively on the high-speed battle of wits between spies and mercs, curves gracefully from tutorial to tough finale, with bot support ensuring that practice opportunities exist whether online or not. In three-a-side deathmatches, the balances of spy gadgetry and merc brawn have been evidently refined, though not every map is a classic.

Sam Fisher begins *Double Agent* as a tiring father-figure of two families – Echelon and his own – but with one mission and cutscene he loses them both. Rather than twist him into a preposterous anti-hero, this downbeat premise has hollowed him out and made him a shadow once again. It's a shrewd acknowledgement of *Splinter Cell's* dilemma, the last game being so complete – avant-garde, almost – that the only way forward was back. Not chaos theory then, but catastrophism.

The new Fisher is unmasked for several *Double Agent* missions, which does nothing to humanise him or thaw his cool exterior – it's just another disguise, tailored for one of several new avenues of stealth that *Splinter Cell* has freed itself to explore. Social incongruity plays a major role in this new game's story – an actually rather dull tale of undercover counter-terrorism – and four multi-objective safehouse missions act as laboratories for testing it out.

Masquerading as a rock-faced solider of the JBA, a terrorist cell with WMDs to deploy on US soil, Fisher lands two checklists of opposing objectives, and a trust gauge that not only compels him to tick off as many as possible, but also toys with his allegiance in ways that transcend the usual good-versus-evil scenarios. Smothering this system with every other that the series has previously introduced, plus a record number of gadgets and NPCs, *Double Agent* displays a certain recklessness that makes its premise feel appropriate, if not borderline ingenious.

The unpredictability that results, however – with environments such as a rioting prison and Congolese warzone throwing umpteen variables into the mix – requires *Splinter Cell* to loosen a traditionally tight grip. Detection by the AI takes precious seconds to become an objective-failing alert, and this leniency lends the tactic of knocking AIs from their clockwork paths and stealing them into shadow an abandon worthy of *Manhunt*. Hurrying you with timers and threats, it's less of a waiting game than ever before – ironic when you consider its release date.

Delayed by several months, *Double Agent* explains its absence through sheer volume of innovative change and intricate detail. Striking one of the finest balances of texture and geometry since *Resident Evil 4*, it raises its looks to the power of 360 with superb lighting, shadowing, anti-aliasing and material shaders. HDR effects create hiding places where you've been taught to least expect them, and the variable transparencies of the fabrics, plastics and glass that decorate its world make AI line of sight a thrillingly dynamic concern. Thick with surprise, if not necessarily consequence, this is the product of a clear-cut agenda meeting the time, resources, and talent to see it through.

Maintaining Ubisoft's healthy approach to multiplayer support is key, and *Double Agent's* spies-versus-mercs deathmatch and co-op modes (see 'Ninja theory') represent an individually successful yet thematically consistent design lineage. Though the Clancy series entirely consists of such well-rounded packages, it's *Splinter Cell* that shines – a game of equally accomplished halves. **[8]**





Minigames include safe-cracking, bomb defusing and the classic lock-picking. They're decent, but modest enough to complete themselves if you unlock the right gadgets



KILLZONE: LIBERATION

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: £35 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SCEE DEVELOPER: GUERRILLA
PREVIOUSLY IN: E164, E167



The broad beams of light cast by Helghast eyes betray their state of alertness, but it's a trivial detail, the AI so naturally on edge that it takes just a distant jog to turn their passive yellow gaze into expletive-triggering red

Having cooked grenades and flipped gun-stocks in *Killzone* on PS2, Guerrilla is again indulging its interest in the base mechanics of combat, though this time as much out of necessity as desire. Unlike Konami when it made *Coded Arms*, the Dutch developer has taken the FPS command set, mapped it on to PSP's button set, and found that the maths simply don't add up. So it's devised something old and something new: a handheld shooter with a retro viewing angle, modern perspective, and substantially different approach to control.

Players resume control of *Killzone*'s Jan Templar, though if the goal was to create a sense of apposition between this story and the last, then the greatest similarity is that they're both rubbish. Host planet Vekta is characterised by hardware and terrain rather than words and events, *Killzone*'s narrative having already plumbed such depths of cliché that it barely registers while playing. *Liberation*'s four chapters, with four distinct levels in each, visit several dying lands which only flicker to life when someone pulls the trigger. Luckily, there's seldom a time when they're not.

In practice, the game's combat favours decision over precision, PSP's two shoulder buttons working alone and in tandem to provide reliable lock-ons (one for people, the other for objects) as well as a rolling dodge and defensive crouch. They help establish a tense pattern of shoot and evade which AI aggression, together with weapon fire and reload rates, keeps to a ferocious beat. The reduction in scale hasn't diminished Templar's abilities too much, with a melee attack and grenade toss (uncooked this time, directed by lock-on or visual aid) rounding out his skills. But don't read this as a passport to run-and-gun, because that isn't *Liberation*'s game.



Directing allies to targets and cover points sends the game into momentary slow-motion, keeping your strategic play manageable but spontaneous. Ammo chests do the same, with a pop-up interface that avoids pulling you out of the action

When they're not shouting obscenities, the Helghast prove surprisingly shrewd marksmen, especially when leading their target, peppering your anticipated trajectory with wide arcs of fire. Spontaneity is seldom fruitful under these conditions, or indeed in warzones as booby-trapped as Vekta's. Much of the game is spent finding opportunities in the devious environment, your choice of weapon, and your position relative to enemies and any nearby supply crates or pick-ups. But when being suitably armed is as imperative as it is here, it's frustrating to note that the game sometimes hangs you out to dry, starving you of ammo or a means of escape. It's surprising also, in a game so otherwise smart.



With ideally staggered checkpoints and responsive allied units, *Liberation* reliably fills idle moments with invigorating handheld combat, its AI quick to improvise and exploit the high grounds and trenches crammed into PSP's widescreen. While it has enough tricks up its sleeve to see you through to the end, however, from jetpacks and drivable vehicles to Helghast droids and dogs, it finds its groove early and seldom strays. A couple of murderous boss battles spike the difficulty level during the second half, but what occurs for the most part is a largely cyclical, if inspired and infectious routine. **[7]**



Two epic scraps close out the final chapters, the first being a mech battle (below) that pushes the game's difficulty to a heart-pounding peak. Both nerves and endurance come under fire, though sadly for too long





The characteristics of enemy classes are so well defined that they trigger distinct gut responses. With a Kevlar-clad shotgun trooper, for example, you can expect a quick emptying of the gut as you run for the nearest hillock

Extend extra



Factors such as camera distance and screen brightness sometimes conspire against *Liberation*, but to compensate there's a healthy range of PSP-tailored gametypes. Each unlocked level hosts arcade challenges which provide points to be fed back into the main game for upgraded abilities and inventory slots. Inventive but shallow, they're best played alongside the campaign to make progress easier. The game also supports ad-hoc co-op for two players, but we encountered sporadic lag. The rudimentary but generous deathmatch had similar problems, though the issue is probably one of wifi bandwidth as much as code.



SCARFACE: THE WORLD IS YOURS

FORMAT: PC, PS2, XBOX (VERSION TESTED) PRICE: £40
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: VIVENDI DEVELOPER: RADICAL
PREVIOUSLY IN: E162, E167



Copper feel



Scarface handles law enforcement fluidly, even if its complexity takes some lengthy cop-baiting to become clear. A bar borders the mini-map: as Montana commits visible crime it gradually fills with white, increasing the likelihood of a cop appearing to track him down. Montana can simply confront the officer and fast-talk his way out, but if he's seen committing a further infraction the bar starts filling red and the police give serious chase. Players can still lose the cops by exiting the circular area of 'heat' on the map and outpacing any pursuers, but if the bar totally fills then, as the game so plainly puts it, 'you are fucked!' and the full weight of Miami's finest comes crashing down. As overdone as it sounds, it's a system that rewards well-organised players, but can easily crush those without any backup plan.

The role that pro-crime, free-roaming games put the player into could be described in two words: psychopathic workaholic. Which is why, despite *Scarface*'s conceit – an alternate ending to the movie, where Cuban drug baron Tony Montana survives its climactic battle – its infamous lead character, the crown prince of cocky swagger, remains the perfect fit for this style of game, and is a strong presence that blends well into the urban gangster-spree template.

Tony's aim is, of course, to rebuild his Miami-based empire via a stranglehold of aggressive acquisitions, and such ownership feels effective here for two reasons. First, the world is a relatively compact one and it's mercifully easy to familiarise yourself with it, and second, Montana simply digs his heels in and goes to work on the city, wrenching control of each district's commercial assets and eliminating rival gangs. In fact, the main thread of the story feels bare next to Tony's main occupation of drug and cash running, which starts out with small street deals, and expands into more profitable large-scale distribution where fronts can be equipped with guards and CCTV to protect against retaliatory gang attacks.

Aside from such peripheral detail, the game's core – gunfighting – is supremely vicious, able to cut an unwary player down in seconds, an aspect that can grind when some mission restarts can insist on making you sit through cutscenes and loading each time, or drops you into certain missions with your weapons removed and no explanation as to why. But Montana's capacity for violence is just as ferocious; *Scarface*'s guns are rip-roaring and the swift lock-on system allows for custom targeting of body parts with the right stick, while manual aiming offers the reward of more 'Balls', the measure of Tony's actions. Bare fist fighting is a drab fallback, but the trademark chainsaw gorily livens the melee system up, allowing for limb-specific dismemberments. And taunting a victim after they've been downed isn't just a gimmick; the boost of Balls you get from it contributes considerably towards filling the Blind Rage meter to achieve an invulnerable firstperson state where all kills restore your health, completely turning the tide of an intense shootout. And, at any moment, you're a few button presses away from having a car of your choice – complete with ammo-packed weapons locker in the boot – chauffeured directly to you, with a weapons dealer permanently on hand to ensure that neither of these vital commodities run out.

It can feel much like all work and no play, but it's work that's professionally rendered, adding some solid detail and feedback to the traditional *GTA*-style framework. But even with quality sound design and slick vehicle handling bolstering the experience, it's a game whose mission variety can't match Rockstar's quality well enough to provide a superior experience. **[7]**





***Scarface*'s morality – Montana verbally refuses to shoot pedestrians – becomes invisible in practice for those players who don't wish to rampage. This morality vanishes when playing as a Henchman, but it's surprisingly welcome that NPCs can be threatened into giving up a vehicle, instead of wrenching the driver out**



Eventually, Montana has access to three henchmen – Driver, Enforcer and Assassin. The player assumes the role of each to take care of self-explanatory menial tasks and sidequests that can be used to build up cash





With sufficient progress under his belt, Montana can chat up 'femme fatales', recruiting them to stand around his mansion. They provide upgrades, but the process of chatting them up is a pointless minigame – maybe a highly accurate realisation of pretending to be interested



MAGE KNIGHT APOCALYPSE

FORMAT: PC PRICE: £30 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: NAMCO BANDAI (US), DEEP SILVER (UK)
DEVELOPER: INTERSERV/NAMCO BANDAI AMERICA PREVIOUSLY IN: E164



Thirdperson control is looser, and targeting fuzzier, than the genre-standard click-to-move, which can prove a liability – but it's a largely welcome addition

Like *Grand Theft Auto*, *Diablo* has proved remarkably resistant to the reverse-engineering of its alchemy: across a decade of clones, few manage the feat of hacking, slashing and walking forwards at the same time. On the face of it, *Mage Knight Apocalypse* isn't the stuff of iconoclasts. For starters, it's called *Mage Knight Apocalypse*; and the miniatures licence it draws from demands no eldritch suspender belt goes untied or orcish wardrum unsounded.

More concerningly, the basic attacks provide only a vague sense of connection – an oversight as fundamental as the guns lacking kick in a shooter. And yet *Apocalypse* manages to remain compelling, thanks in no small part to a console-styled – or perhaps *World Of WarCraft*-styled – free camera and thirdperson character control. As a result, the gameworld's scale is absorbing (though still illusory, with one-track level design) and immediate, washing over its well-trodden clichés with colour, glow and an underwater depth-of-field.

The five characters are smartly differentiated, each operating on their own skew of a health/mana system and fielding a smattering of skills that are satisfying and, if not original, at least cribbed from further afield than is usual in the genre. For a game with an experience-free advancement system – characters' powers grow through use rather than distribution of points – there's a brief sensation that the actual game is levelling up as you play, growing more confident and vital.



Most levels do their best to enliven the rail-driven paths with sightseeing moments. The overall arcade flavour prompts replay even without randomly-generated romps



Party control is largely hands-off, other than spurring on dawdling AI – their skills and gear upgrade in pace with yours

It's a shame, then, that *Apocalypse* has no head for numbers. The familiar balance issues of a flooded economy, under- or over-powered skills and a mess of attributes that make no discernable difference are all present, though in the shadow of larger problems. Bizarrely erratic difficulty pacing makes many early encounters simply impossible without death-and-restart attrition, while later levels may never dent a life-bar. Worse, the climb up the equipment ladder, the action-RPG's all-important addiction cycle, stalls for a paralysing late-game stretch where all items are either inferior or unusable.

Since you're unlikely to be playing it for the story – which only truly registers when bosses' monologues are plastered, irremovably, over the top third of the screen mid-battle – all that's left are good intentions and flawed mechanics. There are more of the former than in many entries in the genre, and if you find its imperfections endearing there's much to position *Apocalypse* as one of the bolder attempts to further the art of the click-fest. But lacking the polish or the poise of its inspiration, it's unfortunate that only the dedicated will notice. **[6]**





The interface is left wanting for the absolute slickness the action, and constant menu-delving, requires. You'll soon wish the health meter was at least twice as obtrusive, too





Each character has personalised equipment: you'll always loot what you can use, but there's no scope for individual fashion. A neat tweak to the 'item set' provides bonuses with all completed sets of armour, not just ultra-rares

Herbal remedies



In addition to a somewhat flat jewel-based system for customisinng your weapons, *Apocalypse* offers the ability to brew the game's various potions from herbs collected during play. Lifted practically wholesale from MMO professions (one MMO's in particular) and as dry a formula as that entails, you'll likely decide to stick with the middle-man and just buy your potions from town – if only to save on precious backpack space.



Your flying saucer remains a powerfully destructive weapon, and will aid the completion of many missions that were originally intended to be carried out on foot









Blonde, busty and leather-clad, Russian agent Natalya is at least an attempt to introduce a little in-depth characterisation, but comes off as little more than some two-dimensional eye candy for Crypto to snarl over. Humour arising from this situation is far is more Carry On than Zoolander



Crypto can once again body-snatch humans and surreptitiously read the thoughts of passers by. The results provide the funniest material in the game, though the repetitive process begins to wear thin very quickly

DESTROY ALL HUMANS 2

FORMAT: PS2, XBOX (VERSION TESTED) PRICE: £35
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: THQ
DEVELOPER: PANDEMIC PREVIOUSLY IN: E168

Cryptosporidium, *Destroy All Humans 2*'s extra-terrestrial star with the one-track mind, has an amazing ability – he can miraculously clone himself after death. Since each subsequently cloned Crypto retains his predecessor's character traits and memories, it could be argued that every one of them is a marked improvement upon the original. So it's an unfortunate irony that Pandemic hasn't been able to pull off the same trick with this expanded sequel.

Set in the swinging '60s, the alien finds himself drawn away from his free-loving existence into a world of Cold War inveiglement. A global conspiracy involving everyone from the KGB to Japanese salarymen threatens to end life as we know it, turning our hero from persecutor to protector of humankind.

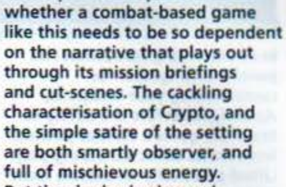
Stepping away from the Stateside isolationism of the first game, *Destroy All Humans 2* offers four fictitious versions of international cities for immolation: San Francisco, London, Tokyo and Moscow. Of these, only Takoshima (Tokyo) is really noteworthy, its mixture of harebrained zaniness and alluring exoticism lifting it above the locations-by-numbers ambience of the rest. That said, reducing the Palace of Westminster to a mound of smouldering rubble with your saucer is an irresistible proposition and an action that will certainly survive repeated play.

Yet, wherever you are in the game world, movement feels bizarrely restrictive. Missions contraints constantly interrupt the flow of terror you're itching to exact, adding a sense of leaden linearity that's at striking odds with the *GTA*-style free-roaming framework. Some nice graphical touches appear in realtime animations, seamlessly segueing from play to action sequences, but much of this is undone by lazy, clumsy cutscenes that tend to come in way too early.

Crypto's powerful talents, then, are a major force for redemption in an environment undeserving of its leering protagonist. Telekinesis allows him to pick up and play with any stationary object or petrified human, while new ability Transmog transforms vehicles and street furniture into power-ups for his Disintegrator. Chief among new weapons is the Dislocator – a wacky, Dan Dare version of *Half-Life 2*'s gravity gun that uproots its target and flings it around the screen with random abandon. A new co-op mode will allow a second player to join in the chaos, but be warned that since the game is quite short to begin with, completion is likely to come around twice as fast.

All you'll want to know is that murdering terrified humans is, for a while at least, genuinely entertaining – but then wreaking senseless devastation on an unsuspecting Earth was always going to be wickedly pleasurable. *Destroy All Humans 2* is initially enjoyable, entirely endurable and gratifyingly easy. But at its heart it remains an average experience. There's no doubt Crypto deserves another crack at the free-roaming whip at some point over the new generation, and no doubt that, in this as in *Mercenaries*, Pandemic has proved itself an expert in the art of demolition. The question now is whether they can become as skilled at world-building as world-destroying. **[5]**

Crypto scripto



A major pitfall of the game is the quality of the script-writing, which poses the question as to whether a combat-based game like this needs to be so dependent on the narrative that plays out through its mission briefings and cut-scenes. The cackling characterisation of Crypto, and the simple satire of the setting are both smartly observer, and full of mischievous energy. But the clunky, hackneyed plotting and the ubiquitous (and ubiquitously unfunny) references to sex and drugs leave you wishing that the game's story could be as emergent and unpredictable as its gameplay.



Mechs are easily the most enjoyable craft to pilot, and a two-man walker's manoeuvrability and power can be devastating. But it's helpless when caught by a well-placed EMP grenade









The PAC's hover-tank shares more in terms of control with two hover-copters than any landborne vehicle. The simple underglow emanating from the hi-tech vehicle is worthy of a lingering glance, and its strafing ability makes it an excellent combat choice

BATTLEFIELD 2142

FORMAT: PC PRICE: £35 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: ELECTRONIC ARTS DEVELOPER: DIGITAL ILLUSIONS
PREVIOUSLY IN: E164, E166

Battlefield 2142 and its futuristic setting succeed in illustrating both the shortcomings of developer Digital Illusions' imaginative muscle and the unwavering strength of the base material. As another exercise in *Battlefield*'s electrifying theatre of war it is satisfyingly good. However, despite some pleasingly blunt and efficient weapons-of-tomorrow, *BF2142* fails to stimulate to the same levels as previous titles in the series, all of which have benefited from a more solid grounding in real-world settings and situations.

Yet *BF2142* can boast a compelling narrative backdrop, evoking a world ravaged by a new ice age and torn apart by a war between the European Union (EU) and the Pan Asian Coalition (PAC) for control of earth's last resources. It maintains the fierce balance expected of a *Battlefield* title, despite reducing the number of classes from seven to four, and the brilliant squad dynamics, with a number of squads reporting to a commander who oversees the entire battle. And while it is not the shot in the arm for the series that *Battlefield 2* provided, *BF2142* at least offers the Titan match type, alongside the usual Conquest mode, to differentiate it from its predecessors (see 'Titanic struggle').

By manifesting *Battlefield*'s team ticket system in the form of an imposing aerial giant, both a moving base and a hulking Achilles heel, *BF2142* increases the urgency and import of every skirmish, and Titan shield power updates flicker earnestly before your eyes, giving you a material sense of the tide of battle. Similarly, that you are fighting over missile-launching artillery points that visibly crash their rockets into the opposition's Titan, and not simply another flag, gives a tangible objective to your actions that makes overcoming hostile resistance all the more rewarding.

Once on board your rival's floating fortress, however, Titan mode suffers from the same slightly lazy design that irks so greatly elsewhere. The white and grey angular corridors make a staid and uninteresting denouement to an otherwise invigorating match type. The closing moments of a Titan match hold a finality never quite as effectively realised in Conquest mode, and so it disappoints that a team's last stand should be little more than a simple corridor massacre.

Other annoying flaws include the lifeless vehicle HUDs, which cannot compare with *BF2*'s gratifying functionality; the two dull and inelegant airborne craft and the perplexing decision to offer only five maps in singleplayer, not one of them a Titan map. The ten locations, of which five are repurposed for Titan matches, also lack the breadth of appeal from footsoldier to sky jockey that made *BF2* such a joy regardless of a player's rank or position on the battlefield.

However these flaws, irritating as they are, do not undermine the frisson of excitement that the game can almost effortlessly raise during tense and well-orchestrated conflicts. As with any online multiplayer experience, the final verdict rests with the skills and dependability of your comrades in arms, but at least with *BF2142* the underlying structure is of such high quality that an adrenaline-fuelled moment is never too far away. **[8]**





The four troop-types are a merger of previous options. Special-Ops and Snipers are now the Recon class, for example, while the Support class retains its role and can deploy turrets

Titanic struggle



***BF2142*'s ace-in-the-hole is the new Titan mode, a redressing of the standard *Battlefield* Conquest conflicts that replaces command points with missile silos and team tickets with the lumbering Titan craft that drift across the battlegrounds. Each silo under your control will pummel the opposing Titan until its defences are breached. At which point your options are either to mount an organised boarding action to detonate the reactor core, or retain control of the grounded missile bays to gradually blast your opponent's Titan from the sky. The obvious choice is to strike at the Titan's heart, as the exhilarating experience of deploying to the airborne platform by APC rocket-pod is not to be missed.**

Fight and dodge continuously without taking a hit, and Gene's intensity meter will grow through four levels – 1, 2, 3 and Die! – with each evolution increasing the threat posed by enemies. One option – grovel – allows the meter to be reset by kowtowing to opponents





Over 100 combat techniques can be unlocked, along with 29 entries for the God Reel. The God Hand is also on call to provide an invulnerable state of heightened power









GOD HAND

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: ¥7,140 (£32) RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), OCTOBER 10 (US), EARLY 2007 (UK) PUBLISHER: CAPCOM DEVELOPER: CLOVER STUDIO PREVIOUSLY IN: E164, E165

For the hub of God



Available for access at any one of the numerous save points, *God Hand*'s hub is, as you'd expect, pretty inexplicable – a wild west mall featuring a straightforward casino and a shop for buying new techniques and God Reel powers. The most useful attraction is a fighting arena, a series of pre-made brawls under varying conditions that let players top up their cash, as well a practice new attacks on a training dummy. And if you do attempt to rough up any of the casino's staff, be prepared to be thrown into the ring with its brutal bouncer.

The most accurate summation of *God Hand* is probably the least useful: With Shinji Mikami and Clover Studio having slaved over imaginative, progressive epics *Resident Evil 4* and *Okami* respectively, *God Hand* is like the drunken night out needed to wind down from them, a beat 'em up determined to cut loose just for the hell of it.

That's not to say it's at all dumb or throwaway. The game features a supremely athletic combat system of responsive directional dodges mapped to the right stick, alongside a trio of face buttons used for a variety of melee attacks. And its initial toughness is quickly offset by a structure that, like *Viewtiful Joe*, allows the player to save or stock up on shop items in between every section of a level. Unlike *Joe*, however, is the lack of variation and imagination; the hook to *God Hand* is that there's very nearly no hook, leaving it down to the player to express themselves through their chosen repertoire of punches, slaps, roundhouse kicks, machine-gun stomps, groin punts and spanks, plus a variety of brutal, outrageous special attacks via lead character Gene's 'God Reel', brought on by the power of his titular hand.

And as the gloves come off, so does the straitjacket – Clover's eagerness to introduce humour into everything it does is epitomised here, in a continuous prank of a videogame whose plot and characters answer to no one but its creators. No sooner have you dusted off the gorilla dressed in wrestling garb – who steps down from a bus to sit on a bench and read his newspaper – before being confronted by a disturbing Power Rangers spoof, the Mad Midget V, with a 50 Cent reference thrown in for good measure. Not to mention the subsequent trip through a circus forecourt populated with rainbow-coloured chihuahuas, too; if ever there was the videogame equivalent of feeling punch drunk, it's *God Hand*.

It's completely driven by the player's need to be a ludicrous badass, and its framework is certainly tight enough to allow for skilled, satisfying play. But it means that it's as tough on the tendons as it is on those who want their hands to be held, with each level consisting of fight after fight that can feel depressingly identikit for those not willing to throw themselves into it. And that bizarre humour – equal parts slapstick, self-reference, surrealism and joyous stupidity – either seals the deal or thuds the final nail into the coffin. It's a game with a limited but powerful appeal, that'll be loved, hated or overlooked as a *Killer 7*-style blip, uncompromising to the point of leaving no other choice. Take it or leave it; just don't ignore it, or you may miss the videogame equivalent of a daft night out with some of Capcom's finest minds. **[7]**



God Hand's perspective is very nearly over the shoulder, and initially cramped, offering no camera control thanks to the right stick's use for rapid-fire directional dodging



A brave decision to trim the original interface of its chaff leaves just an inventory box and context-sensitive mouse-click, though target reticules for Sam's guns also feature



SAM & MAX: CULTURE SHOCK

FORMAT: PC **PRICE:** $9 (£5) **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: TELLTALE GAMES **DEVELOPER:** IN-HOUSE

In engineering the long-anticipated, never assured return of Sam & Max, Telltale Games has entered a realm where one man's progress is another man's blasphemy. Any nugget you might care to pan from 1992's *Sam & Max Hit The Road*, be it the palette of 256 colours, the stencilled clouds, the iMuse soundtrack or the single-minded worldview of cornball America, is bona fide gaming gold. *Culture Shock*'s CG heresy, then, is its wisdom and its curse, shrugging the weight of expectation from its shoulders yet leaving few creative crutches.

First, the good news: this is a very different Sam & Max, but no impostor. The realtime 3D duo are still the Penn & Teller, if not the Kane and Lynch, of comedy crimefighting. Sam remains the least laconic person (talking dog, if you want to split hairs) in the videogame universe, his acknowledgement of Max's ultraviolent impulses as impassive as ever, and his remaining lines spent meditating on pop culture's ills and his own checklist of mental conditions. Though the game's camera views the pair through close-ups and reaction shots rather than SCUMM's distant pans, it still conveys the flavour of their world while camouflaging those key interactive objects. Call it polygon- rather than pixel-hunting.

Conversations, meanwhile, strike a good balance of subterfuge, signposting and pure entertainment. *Culture Shock*'s supporting cast is as small as the game's own diminutive size suggests, but they have their quirks, even if the twisted stereotypes they represent pale next to *Hit The Road*'s nation of weirdos. The comic hit rate here is lower than you might have hoped for, but Telltale shows commendable knowledge of when to simply emulate the Sam & Max of old and when to move forward. Because this game's structure is so sensible and its humour nonetheless consistent, it seldom has you asking whether it's being progressive enough or not.

With some puzzles it is, for sure. Though it's still a game of locks, keys and switches, it disguises them with occasional ingenuity. A prime example is Sam having to revise, interactively, his memory of a dream to convince a tattoo-parlour psychiatrist that he secretly wants to marry his mother. Though quintessentially absurd, such trials are almost always logical in their solutions.

Culture Shock never obstructs or backtracks, either, which is a commendable act of honesty that only exacerbates, sadly, its big problem – it's episodic. The meat of the point-and-click is adding that waypoint to the map, and uncovering the secrets behind every door. Though set to be released monthly and bargain priced, the Sam & Max episodes will always dump you back to the desktop once their self-contained cases are complete. They lack the sense of cohesion, scale and possibility that was *Hit The Road*'s cornerstone, and even if you want to gorge on them all at once, you'll still appreciate the pieces rather than the whole. **[6]**



If each Sam & Max episode is to have its own story, nemesis and climax, then here's hoping that they improve over time. With his plan to dominate Earth's TV audiences with hypnotic 'Eye-bo'-ocular training videos, TV has-been Brady Culture (right) is a fun sideshow freak, but ultimately a poor antagonist

He sounds a bit off, but Telltale's captured an otherwise perfect Max. Neither he nor Sam would really harm a person, but you shudder to think what they'd do to a fly





Keeping all interactions, no matter how inappropriate, within the grasp of the point-and-click interface, *Culture Shock*'s minigames highlight Telltale's respect for genre tradition, and an insight into when and how it works





Hit the highway



The level of series creator Steve Purcell's involvement in *Culture Shock* is unclear: closing credits include him as a writer, opening titles do not. Nevertheless, in the build-up to release he's done much to lend credibility, and authenticity, to Sam & Max's return. Hosted on Telltale's website, which has turned to Turner's GameTap service for distribution of its games, Purcell's web-comics are a reminder of how durable his singular wit can be. Sadly, they're immediately more adventurous than the duo's first rather constrained journey back into software. Other side-projects include a comic generator and related user gallery, faux interviews with the game's supporting cast, an a frequently updated FAQ.



The only partial use of speech is forgivable – in fact, considering the toe-curling acting and poor timing of what speech there is, it's a relief – but the gauche, sing-song style of many of the subtitles doesn't convince



RULE OF ROSE

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: £35 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: 505 GAME STREET DEVELOPER: PUNCHLINE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E160



Playing fetch



In a half-hearted attempt to put some meat on *Rule Of Rose*'s brittle bones, the game has been heavily loaded with non-critical collectable items for Brown to sniff out. Some are health-restoring foods; some simply lead to others, via Brown's nose; some are rare items that can be traded with the Aristocrats for food or weapons. Completists (and perverts) will want to track down Jennifer's extra costumes, but for the rest of us the film reels and gramophone records are more appealing. These offer access to Shirogumi's striking cutscenes, and the unusually spare and elegant score, mostly performed by piano and string quartet.

Billing itself as 'a mysterious, unthinkable, filthy tale', *Rule Of Rose* draws Lord of the Flies, sinister nursery rhymes, uncomfortable sexual undertones and a very light dusting of kneesocks-and-zeppelins steampunk fantasy together in a thoroughly researched and painstakingly mounted 1930s English setting. Although the central theme of a timid, fragile girl at the mercy of dark forces is quintessential Japanese survival horror, you've never seen things like this in a game before – and the effect, during a startling cinematic attract reel and the opening minutes of the game proper, is arresting. Unfortunately, your attention is lost again as soon as *Rule Of Rose* reveals itself to be no more than a torpid scavenger hunt dressed in some disjointed, posturing imagery.

The story follows Jennifer, an 'unlucky young girl' (although going by her figure she's more of a young woman, the better for us to leer at her distress) who's sent to an orphanage after some nameless tragedy. There she finds a desolate, filthy building with nary an adult presence, ruled by a ritualistic hierarchy of cruel children calling themselves the Red Crayon Aristocrats Club, who torment her and transport her, inexplicably, aboard an airship to do their bidding. Their bidding involves making an offering of a gift every 'month', or chapter. You'll spend most of your time doing this with the aid of Brown, a pet dog who can guide you to items by sniffing other related (or, quite often, completely unrelated) items in your inventory. Brown is an original, sweet touch, and relieves some of the tedium of these trawls – but only some. They only ever seem to amount to a trail of breadcrumbs, interrupted by a fight, the occasional stilted exchange or a simple puzzle.

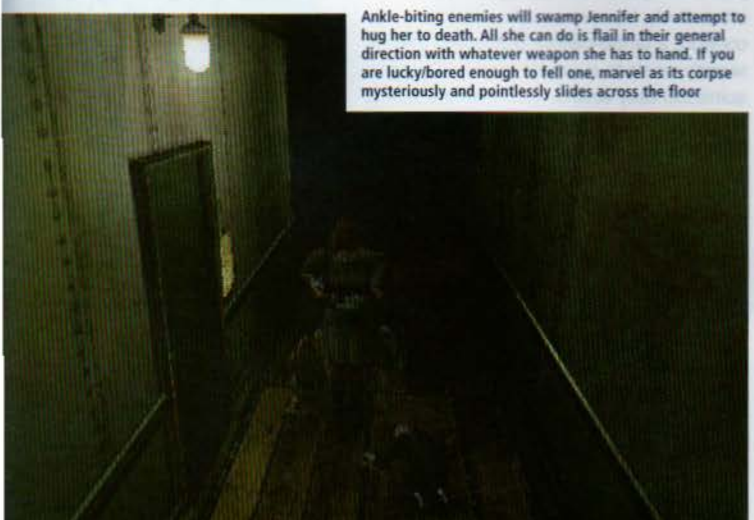
Combat is where *Rule Of Rose*'s artful mask finally cracks and the depth of the game's mechanical ineptitude is laid bare. Its interactions are clumsy at the best of times, but Jennifer's air-stabbing scuffles with moonwalking, hollow-eyed ghost children and the like are quite astonishingly bad. The animation and collision detection defy belief, and the unexplained appearance of these monsters does nothing to scare and everything to undermine the fragile veneer of twisted child psychology that Punchline has so carefully applied. Most enemies can simply be ignored and run away from, but the decision to include boss fights is an unfathomable one.

Much of this could be overlooked if the game delivered on the uncommon promise of its presentation – although beset with languid loading times and some dull areas, it is extremely beautiful, and sometimes genuinely unsettling – and delivers a dark adult horror story like no other. But there is no story, there are no characters, the acting is excruciatingly overplayed; there is no rhyme or reason to any of it, barely even the slow exposition of Jennifer's dark past. It's just a murky brew of meaningless, exploitative dysfunction filling an empty game, and it leaves a bitter taste. **[3]**



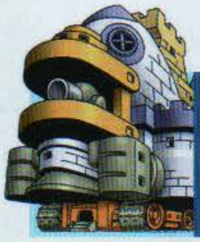


There's no denying the craftsmanship with which Punchline has built its strange little world; the lighting, texturing and attention to detail are all outstanding, and the game has a genuinely eerie look, especially on the ground. A grainy filter adds to the vintage feel



Ankle-biting enemies will swamp Jennifer and attempt to hug her to death. All she can do is flail in their general direction with whatever weapon she has to hand. If you are lucky/bored enough to fell one, marvel as its corpse mysteriously and pointlessly slides across the floor





DRAGON QUEST HEROES: ROCKET SLIME

FORMAT: DS PRICE: $35 (£19) RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), TBA (UK)
PUBLISHER: SQUARE ENIX DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

Dragon Quest: The Journey Of The Cursed King was, plainly put, one of the most accomplished games ever made. It was a demonstration of the experience and expertise that Square Enix has amassed over dozens of RPG iterations. We're used to the idea that games get better because the technology improves; less used to the idea that games get better because the companies that make them have simply had a lot of practice.

And that same sensation – if not the overall ambition – permeates the whole of *Rocket Slime*. It effortlessly executes parts of RPG design that other games haven't even noticed need their attention. And so the balance between the active and the strategic is seamlessly maintained. The young princeling slime, called upon to protect his kingdom from an absurd attack of animal misfits, alternates between active sections – occasional combat, item collecting, puzzle solving – and more tactical tank battles. These are faintly reminiscent of a card-battle game, since the ammunition available to your tank is formed from the stock of items you've collected in the main game. Rather than use up what you've hoarded, and force endless trudges to restock the stockade, these items instead form the template for the varieties of ammo that will be continually provided to you throughout each battle. Your job is then to scoop the ammunition up, and decide in what order, and from which tank, to fire the various weapons, which inflict damage, act as shields, heal your tank and cause adverse status effects to your opponents. Pacing, too, is masterfully handled: as you free the slimes captured in the war they'll open up areas of your home village, new items open up new recipes, new skills open up new avenues of exploration. Controls are efficient, centred around a rubber-band twang that seems a natural mode of expression for a slime, and the difficulty curve is more of a gentle drift, rolling you through a game which is quick to share its delights and slow to cause any kind of upset. There may not be anything eye-catchingly bold about *Rocket Slime*, but there's close to nothing to criticise: this is the work of masters of their craft. **[7]**



Multiplayer tank battles can be had against opponents who also own the game, but even in singleplayer the arrival of helper slimes, each with their own skills, adds new tactical options



***Rocket Slime* doesn't make especially ambitious use of the DS, but it's an unusually fully-featured package – visually beautiful and stocked with picture-painting, item-synthesising distractions**



PROJECT SYLPHEED

FORMAT: 360 PRICE: ¥8,000 (£35)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBA (UK)
PUBLISHER: SQUARE ENIX DEVELOPER: GAME ARTS/SETA



In space, much of what you see is history – a report of celestial events carried at the speed of light. *Project Sylpheed* is likewise a collision that occurred 16 years ago between two shoot 'em ups from vastly different universes. One was the original *Silpheed*, a vertical scroller fought on a two-dimensional plane, first conceived by Game Arts in 1988. The other was *Wing Commander*, a stellar dogfight simulator fought in three-dimensional space, ported by the same studio in 1990. So if the new *Sylpheed* feels like a psychedelic dream of the two combined, then you're closer to the truth than you think.

Spicing up its mix of cosmic fireworks and cockpit drama are HD horsepower and an east/west culture clash between the aforementioned games. In beautifully crisp CG anime – the kind permanently in orbit around planet Square – *Sylpheed* stages a decent space opera which, were the intervening game removed, you could happily watch from beginning to end. *Wing Commander* or *Colony Wars* fans however, wondering where their beloved genre went, will find this a complete, though perhaps unambitious package. Among its strengths are a succinct HUD, superior flight and targeting controls, a full range of objectives and thoughtfully staggered checkpoints. In these regards, the also comparable *Ace Combat* can't compete.

Much ordnance tends to be wasted during the multi-stage missions, and the game values a good lightshow over precision, but the lattices of missile and thruster trails that bring life to its starfields and nebulae justify that choice. Good performances are converted by debriefings into currency, and a healthy selection of chain guns, missile silos and gauss cannons is gradually unlocked for your ship's various weapon mounts. Difficulty hops noticeably from one encounter to the next, but seldom snares you with an underhanded spike.

A polished and complete experience, *Sylpheed* may or may not see a western release; whoever lands the job will have quite a localisation job on their hands. The import version's language barrier is considerable, but then so are the appreciable portions of the game that lie before it. **[7]**



Following flight school comrades turned enemies by war, and a human race torn apart by hardship and betrayal, *Sylpheed*'s pre-rendered story hops unapologetically from one genre convention to the next, but delivers them all with panache



When neither capital ships nor nemeses such as the Night Ravens are on your hit list, enemies are ripe for the harvest, lallygagging beneath the reticule as missiles corkscrew up their tailpipes


SERIOUS SAM

TIME EXTEND

SERIOUS SAM

FORMAT: **XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **GOTHAM GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **CROTEAM**
ORIGIN: **CROATIA**
RELEASE DATE: **OCTOBER 2002**

Croteam's firstperson shooter doesn't redefine the genre, it simply defines it. Whoever said a game needs complexity to be compelling?

Serious Sam's plot is the stuff of early-era computer titles, generic in structure but footloose in detail. Selected by an alien race for his sheer awesomeness, 'Serious' Sam Stone is flung back in time to save humanity from another galactic presence, cosmic terrorist and gigalomaniac Mental, perhaps the only bad guy around with a name ridiculous enough to make him a fitting nemesis. Sam is tasked with trekking through Egyptian and Mayan environments – from the original *Serious Sam* and *Serious Sam: The Next Encounter* on PC, respectively, which were stuck together for the Xbox release – to retrieve powerful artefacts while blasting his way through counter-waves of Mental's immense army of assorted freaks. Even the back of the game's box, normally home to all manner of self-aggrandising corporate babble, throws its hands up after trying to explain the plot, accepts the inevitable, and joins in the fun: "Don't ask us how or why this is happening. All we can tell you is, this is SERIOUS…"

Even the back of the game's box, normally home to all manner of self-aggrandising babble, throws its hands up after trying to explain the plot

And so, instead of pouring Sam's enemies forth from an airdrop or hidden alcove, most spawn in from all directions based on invisible tripwires and time releases. And whereas the combat motif of many an FPS is corridor and corner claustrophobia, *Serious Sam* taps a much rarer virtual fear – agoraphobia. A good number of its killing fields are huge, expansive flatlands that stretch off as far as the eye can see and the sniper rifle can pierce. Such standoffs offer few places to hide, but trigger forest-fire gunfights where telltale twinkles of enemy spawns can be seen bubbling at the horizon; there's time to start loosing off rockets and peck away at the incoming horde with Tommy gun fire, a satisfying starter for the ruckus that's about to catch up with Sam. Few games give you so many free hits, but then so few games throw you into such a thick carnival of enemies.

It's the Beheaded Kamikaze that remain the game's most memorable enemy, grasping a bomb in each hand and sprinting towards Sam yelling with all the terror you'd expect of such a grisly-named foe. The rising volume of their screams is effectively stressful, the player often unsure of their incoming direction but all too aware of their deadly approach. And it's a melee assault that doesn't stop there: Were-bulls thunder their way towards you, a snorting roar and clattering hooves giving away their presence, playing startling games of chicken that prove easy to sidestep but needed a quarter-circle strafe and an up-close double-barrelled shotgun blast for best removal, a beat 'em up move in another context. Ditto the Kleer Skeletons, who'd leap at Sam just as they entered effective shotgun range and after firing slow-moving projectiles from afar that would result in a chaotic and confusing crossfire by the time they'd gotten close. And there's more: Gnaars, pillows of flesh with a face for a torso and spiked arms, chainsaw-toting Cucurbito Pumpkinmen and Witch Harpies that descend from the sky, dash-clawing Sam from an elevated angle. These enemies aren't so much attacking you,







SAM FANS' DISCO

Before the game had even hit the shelves, Sam already had his own clique of superfans, albeit hard-coded into the game. Squeaky-voiced, swollen headed midgets dressed exactly like their hero, they could be unearthed throughout the game at a number of secret locations. They're even responsible for Sam's descent into the Mayan Sierras at the beginning of *The Second Encounter*, crashing into his spaceship with their ramshackle crate-craft, but soon offer compensation with a hidden disco tucked away under a nearby temple. Upon sight, they'll crowd Sam and tag along behind him for a while, before wombling off in their own random directions. And be warned: slaying them results in death throes of disturbing gurgles and splutters.

as the very core of FPS tactics itself. And all the while, myriad gunners would be slowly advancing or firing from the comfort of a distant tower; humungous Biomechanoids pumping rockets and lasers into the mix, while scorpion-like Arachnoids annoyed with chain guns.

None of this has any subtlety in practice, with multiple groups of each enemy type pouring in from stage left, stage right and stage everywhere else. If *Serious Sam* had featured squad AI, then his enemies would simply have to regroup and form a queue. Operating largely on beeline interception – imagine turbo zombies – any brittle consideration of balance is drowned out by the screams, battle cries and continuous drum solo of gunfire, and Sam's uncomplicated armoury, whose most outlandish constituents are a galleon-spec handheld cannon and a screen-clearing Serious Bomb, is happy to never shut up. Which is convenient: The Great Pyramid and The Grand Cathedral – the end games for the first and second halves of Sam's battle with Mental – are two of the most heavily populated climaxes a game could have. Croteam soaks the player in a tsunami of every enemy type, dotting respawning power-ups about for essential relief, as the heavens open up and the orchestra goes wild.

Even *Serious Sam*'s bosses were excessive. Behemoth Ugh Zhan III (above) turns up at the game's halfway point – the end of Sam's *First Encounter* – as gratuitous a retort to *Doom*'s Cyberdemon as any



But, despite the relentless, mosh-pit nature of almost all of its battles, there are plentiful playful moments to be had, through *Serious Sam*'s serious selection of secrets, with each stage host to a trove of quirky little touches from the bizarre to the rewarding. From the regular appearances of Sam's mad fanbase (see 'Sam fan's disco'), the unlocking of a secret Santa or a strange call taken in an inexplicable phone booth situated in the Mayan foothills, they're buffered by an unpredictable stream of quotes from Sam that are all too happy to barge their way through the fourth wall. The fact that the game thrums with such ill-behaved humour isn't much of a secret, however, apparent from the moment









Some genuinely serious music was drafted in, deep, grinding bass and heavy drums proving atmospheric and often shifting from low-key malevolence to thrash once enough enemies had filled the screen





While gore is a common sight, the blood can be turned green, more down to the game's flippant nature than concerns over violence. 'Hippy' mode, however, causes enemies to explode into flowers





the player boots up. From the jester-like jingle accompanying Croteam's logo, to the bouncy stock-cartoon noises and party-invite font of the front-end – and Sam watching on, impatiently tapping at the TV screen – there can be no doubt that the circus is in town. Even Sam's outfit is far from regulation for an action hero. His chest bears his game's emoticon-simple logo, a grinning bomb with a fizzing fuse, as efficiently iconic and instructive as they get. His voice is gravelled to the point of sounding borderline demonic, his jaw could be used to lay tarmac, and his outlook continues the work started by Duke Nukem. Sam is one of videogames' few homegrown comic-book heroes, completely in and of himself, despite inhabiting a genre that thrives on inbreeding. There's no cinematic pretence, no emotional manipulation, no kowtowing, no apparent intelligence or progressive design; just a game with enormous balls and an indie sensibility backed up with some professional focus.

There's no cinematic pretence or kowtowing, just a game with enormous balls and an indie sensibility backed up with professional focus

In principle, it's understandably easy to embrace such brazen, if charismatic, simplicity. But in practice, how can Sam hold his own in a genre that's obsessed with pushing bleeding-edge looks, and with dizzying the player through refinements and elaborations of rule-sets and load-outs? It's a question to which the answer is, appropriately, very simple. *Sam* is a truly serious game, one whose appreciation of the basics of the form approaches the puritanical. It's a game that sneers at innovation, calls it a pussy and lights a match off its face – an exuberant but infinitely unpretentious shooter that revels in systematic annihilation, which is what the genre is all about. So much so, in fact, that it's hard not to think of it as some kind of estranged 3D great-grandson of *Space Invaders* – shoot, dodge, shoot, dodge. In those days that kind of gameplay would be called intuitive. Now, *Sam* notwithstanding, FPSes have become the poster boys for the high barrier to entry modern gaming has developed.

But there's no need to be so tenuously retrospective, not when *Serious Sam*'s truest relative is alive, well and reliving its youth on Xbox Live Arcade: *Doom*. Run, gun, sprint hungrily through plentiful lines of pick-ups; both even share the same hypnotic blam-pump-blam shotgun rhythm that comes from a game that never requires you to reload. That's the thing about simple games: they're honest and pure, and you can decide whether or not you like them within a conveniently brief time. With this many bullets in play, who needs bullet points on the box?

For all of the irony and wackiness of the title and stylings, *Serious Sam* gives serious prominence to the genre fundamentals. Peel away the zany personality, and you're left with a game that's as much worth a second look as a double take – a joyously unapologetic commemoration of firstperson shooting.



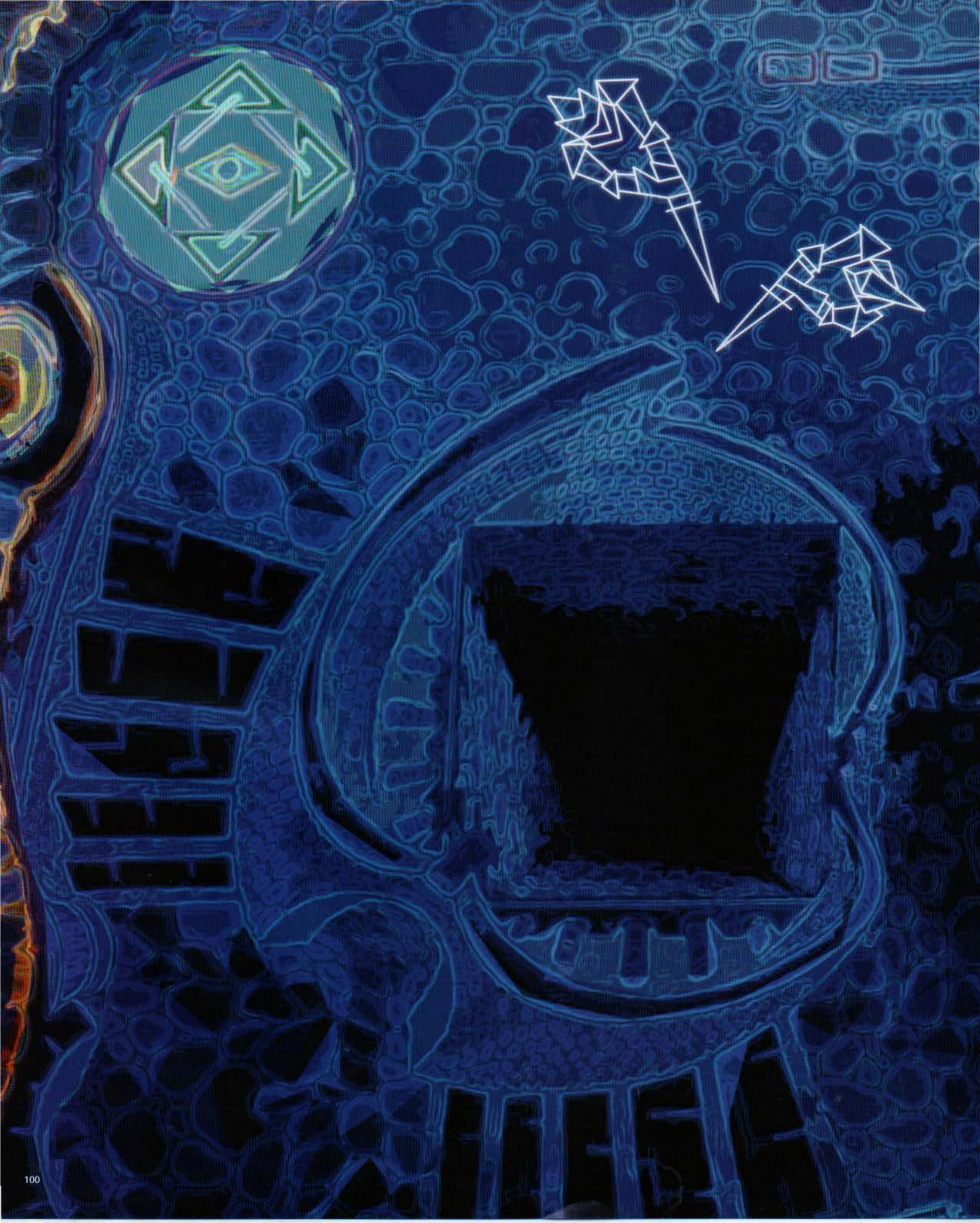
ENCOUNTERS OF THE NEXT KIND

Serious Sam's slow-burning empire has spread to both PS2 and GameCube via *Next Encounter*, a stopgap designed to show other formats a Sam-style good time before the proper sequel made it to Xbox and PC. Introducing vehicles, a new collection of weapons and enemies, and a combo-kill focus system, it successfully captured the spirit, if not the expanse, of the original. *Serious Sam II* arrived last year, as demented and as crammed with prankish secrets as was to be expected, but it was perhaps too scatty and otherworldly to stick in the mind as effectively as the original, introducing environments and indigenous races as bizarre as the rest of the typical *Sam* setup.





Crotia-based developer Croteam started out creating football titles before emerging with *Serious Sam* on PC in 2001, kickabouts that bore a relation to maybe the only other game out there with a title that comes close to its frantic FPS franchise: *Sensible Soccer*



THE MAKING OF... WARRIOR

Magical knights, mirrors and mortal combat.
Meet the spiritual forebear of Soul Calibur

ORIGINAL FORMAT: **ARCADE** PUBLISHER: **VECTORBEAM** DEVELOPER: **TIM SKELLY** ORIGIN: **US** RELEASE DATE: **1979**

How long is a piece of string? "A 60th of a second," replies **Tim Skelly**, confidently.

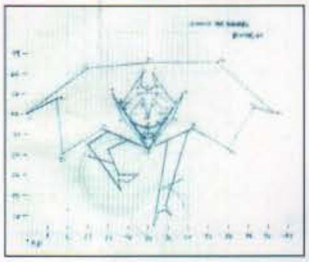
The notional 'string' he's referring to is the maximum vector length he could draw before the screen refreshed. Take any longer than this to display your game graphics and the hardware senses a problem, the vector beam cuts out and an angry arcade player demands his money back. And it was in this split-second that Skelly created the beautiful duelling knights of *Warrior*.

"Visualise a bowl of water with a length of string floating on the surface," he explains. "You can make shapes with it, but even the invisible parts you hold below the water are still part of the length. Larry Rosenthal had created this custom-built computer at Cinematronics for his game *Space War*. Imagine a television with a beam shooting light from the back and everything is cool and groovy unless the beam shoots to the side, in which case the electrons start shooting around in very strange ways. The whole thing can blow up! I don't really know why, but I've seen the smoke and flames. Larry knew to have a good looking display you needed to refresh the screen at 60 frames per second, and so the programmer had to get everything done in those milliseconds or else the machine would just cut out."

"You needed to refresh the screen at 60 frames per second, so the programmer had to get everything done in those milliseconds"

It was one of Rosenthal's laws Skelly had hoped to learn directly from his mentor. Unfortunately, when he arrived to work at Cinematronics in 1977, he found that Rosenthal, who had interviewed the enthusiastic but inexperienced programmer only the week before, had left the company and taken his entire development kit with him. "I was enraged," Skelly admits. "It was just an unconscionable thing to do."

Undaunted, Skelly began from



STRANGE DAYS

Having collaborated so successfully with artist Frank Brunner on the *Warrior* project, Skelly felt it was a natural progression to focus on Dr Strange, a Marvel Comics character that Brunner had worked on, as the basis for his next game.

"I drew the Doctor and worked out all the co-ordinates, but then I had to shrink it down so it could be displayed on screen within the 60th of a second time limit. Once I got it small enough, the face was just too tiny relative to the cape and it was the cape that really gave it that look. Basically, it ceased being a face and when your character stops having a face, you're just not in the ball game any more."

The project was shelved, but above is one of those initial sketches, which give a fascinating insight into the creative process Skelly deployed for *Warrior* and the rest of his vector game portfolio.



"I did the side art for *Warrior* with silk screening, one colour at a time," says Skelly. "Vectorbeam were prepared to really do the job properly. At Cinematronics, it was one less colour with each successive game, down to just white by *Rip-Off*"

scratch. Thanks to an employee who had sneakily made a copy of the machine codes before Rosenthal did his disappearing act, the young coder struggled to understand the esoteric hardware and, against the odds, produced his first title *Starhawk* the same year. He followed this with *Sundance*, a commercial failure but crucial in his own steep learning curve. Thus as he approached his third title, Skelly no longer felt out of his depth.

"When I began *Warrior*, I was in that zone where I felt confident with my abilities. I was aware of the possibilities of the hardware. I knew how many vectors I could draw and how long they could be, but I was also aware of what the processor couldn't do. *Warrior* was very much determined by those limitations."

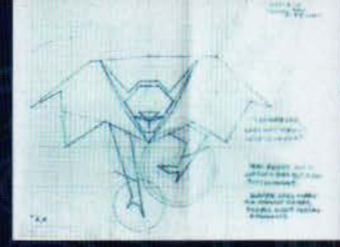


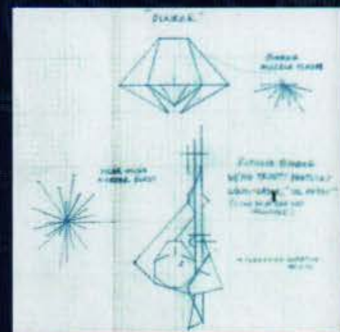
Skelly began to sketch out his armour-clad heroes. The swords and sorcery theme came from his reading of Michael Moorcock's Elric books while the computer compiled the code during the development of his previous game, and a chance meeting with artist Frank Brunner at a comic convention. "I drew in blue on these big sheets of graph paper," he recalls. "I would mark out the distance between each point and optimise the minimum distance the vector would have to travel. I'd be creating tables of all this – start at this co-ordinate, move to this co-ordinate… All on paper and all by hand."

The results were astounding. The combatants boasted detail and character far removed from the tiny spaceships and drifting rocks of other vector games of the period. They moved with an assured grace too, due to Skelly's primitive experiments with motion capture.

"It was like I'd created a pair of these rod puppets, marionettes, and I'd be looking down on them from above. But I realised the only thing the player cared about was the sword. I made that the active point. The thing you're controlling is the tip of the sword and everything else moves in response to that. In fact, that works as a kind of playing strategy. Move the tip of the sword to the back of your opponent's head. It's a pretty good rule for any kind of swordplay."

So Skelly had his two noblemen, elegantly crossing steel. The combat itself was rather less graceful. Skelly notes that there was virtually no hit detection. The maths required to determine whether what were essentially two convoluted lines had collided was too much for the processor to handle. His solution was to embed a hit-box within the body of each knight – the vulnerable 'hearts' of the sparring partners.





Top: Skelly's sketches for the shelved *Dr Strange*, with the vector count in the margin. Above: A rifleman and bunker for a Scott Boden game that eventually evolved into 1981's *Boxing Bugs*

"You and your opponent would go at it with a flurry of blows," explains Skelly with some relish. "Wham, bam, and there would be blood dripping from your side. A coup de grace! But because it isn't precise, it has much more of a quality of reality to it. Like a fistfight, it happens very quickly. Someone dies, someone lives… but why? Is one guy more skilled? Maybe. Maybe someone tripped on a rock! The mistakes are hidden well enough so there's no sense of being robbed and I feel pretty pleased it plays as well as it does."

"Because it isn't precise, it has much more reality to it. Like a fistfight, it happens very quickly. Someone dies, someone lives"

Yet for all its visceral quality, the melee was still between two shining knights in the dark. Skelly had used all the processing power available to render his combatants and nothing was left to create a backdrop to the bloody battle. Inspiration came from a misspent youth frequenting arcades



Vectorbeam was founded by Larry Rosenthal after his hasty departure from Cinematronics. He ended up selling it back to his former employers, and *Warrior* became the company's final release

"The beauty of vector games is that they are a light source," eulogises Skelly. "These bright lights in a dark space. I'd find myself staring at the images, unable to tear my eyes away. I used to think it must have been like primitive man sitting round a fire, staring at the flames"





Though nothing can matche *Warrior* on an original cabinet, the game and an approximation of the background art is supported by MAME

furnished with electromechanical shooting gallery games.

"I needed to give the game some richness, something to look at. I remembered how those early games used half-silvered mirrors, which could display an image that wasn't opaque. You could see through it and superimpose two entirely different images on top of each other. For the layout, I used my imagination and the incredible talent of Frank Brunner and the guys at Vectorbeam, who created this beautifully drawn and modelled background. When I saw what they'd done, I was as knocked out as anybody."

The result was a visual triumph. Skelly's intricate warriors now had an equally exquisite battlefield. He cleverly used the scaling abilities of the hardware to have his knights appear to climb stairs and plummet to their deaths down the two bottomless pits in a swirl of fading vectors.

Combat, however, didn't share the graphical fluidity. Skelly had originally wanted each player to have two joysticks, one for movement and one for controlling their weapon, but financial constraints meant a single stick was used for both. A button allowed players to switch between each mode, a construct recently revisited in *Resident Evil 4*. It was the joysticks themselves, though, that proved the real problem.

"You need to understand that back then, there was no organised industry for making sticks," explains Skelly. "We had to make our own. Our engineer was this survivalist kind of guy and to give you some idea of his mindset, he demanded to be paid in gold. He decided to make them out of plate steel, welded to lengths of pipe with bicycle grips glued to the ends. They made great weapons – I used to keep one with me when I was working through the night as a cudgel in case of attack by coyote. The idea was to drop bolts through to attach them to the machine and leave some slack, but some idiot purchased bolts with threads right to the end. The sticks would tighten until they were literally bolted to the machine. You grab that pair and pull, that cabinet's coming on top of you. *Warrior* did pretty well, but the SNAFU with the joysticks must have hurt it. That and the fact it had to be a twoplayer game."

A weakness perhaps, but a strength too. *Warrior* can proudly take its place in gaming history as the first one-on-one fighting title. As much as it signified the start of something, though, it also marked an ending of sorts. It was the final game to be released by Vectorbeam before the company was consumed by Cinematronics; it represented the high point of black-and-white vector art, released a year before *Tempest* brought colour to those shining lines; and it arrived at the close of a decade which had begun with *Computer Space* and *Pong*, but would end with *Space Invaders* and *Asteroids*. Player versus machine titles were in the ascendancy and would remain on top until player versus player games returned to prominence in the early '90s.

It's a point not lost on Skelly. "I can remember when *Street Fighter* went through the roof. Whole arcades just full of those machines. Maybe the industry had ignored a very real desire in players for too long – the basic desire to want to beat the crap out of someone! And yeah, of course, I appreciated that was something I'd done first with *Warrior*."



FRAGILE BEAUTY

Though *Warrior* can justly claim to be the beginning of one of videogames' most fruitful genres, its rarity means it remains unknown to the majority of players. This is largely due to the unreliability of its hardware, particularly when compared to Atari's far more robust vector cabinets.

"Our technology was just cheaper," Skelly acknowledges. "It had to be. Cinematronics was a very, very small company. There were only two game engineers, myself and Scott Boden, and some hardware guys. Even the guy who tried to fix any faulty boards had to double as the company drug dealer.'

And so special thanks to Archer Maclean, who has lovingly restored what must be the only working *Warrior* machine in the UK to mint condition and whose help in producing this article was invaluable. He, and American collector Brian Jones, also kindly provided the accompanying images of this most beguiling of cabinets.



Peer inside a *Warrior* cabinet and you'll discover that the game's entire playfield of pits and spiral stairs, intricately modelled in plastic, is inverted and hidden behind the marquee. The purple glow only adds to the Aladdin's cave experience

Studio profile

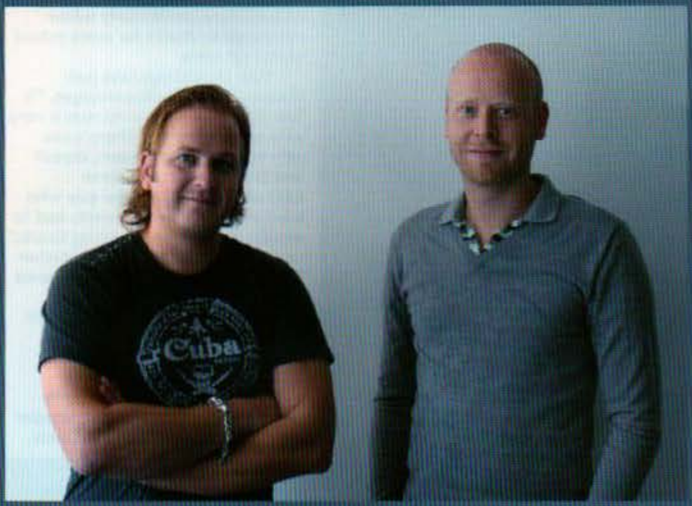
Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

COMPANY NAME: Avalanche Studios

DATE FOUNDED: February 2003

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 90

STUDIO HEADS: Christofer Sundberg, Linus Blomberg (below)



URL: www.avalanchestudios.se

SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY
Just Cause (360, PC, PS2, Xbox)



Just Cause (reviewed last issue) allows players huge freedom in a world designed to be an explosive playground. Stunts are part of the game, including attacks carried out via freefall (below)

avalanche STUDIOS



LOCATION: Stockholm, Sweden

CURRENT PROJECTS: New project with Eidos, two unannounced projects (360, PC, PS3)

ABOUT THE STUDIO

"Avalanche Studios was founded in 2003 by two guys with a passion for computer games and technology, with true grit and balls of brass. Avalanche is a privately held independent developer which has successfully grown from the original four-man start-up unit to a studio with more than 90 employees in only three years.

"The company's first game, *Just Cause*, (which is based on an original Avalanche Studios IP) was released in September this year and has received several awards (Xbox 360 Gamer Gold Award and Editor's Choice Award, IGN Editor's Choice Award, Official Xbox 360 Magazine Must Buy as well as many more).

"But *Just Cause* was only the beginning. Avalanche Studios is currently working on two highly ambitious titles for two separate publishers. We are growing rapidly, and every day we add new recruits to our ranks."



How engines became pipelines

Even if middleware companies still use the term 'game engine' what they actually mean is game production pipeline, as demonstrated by new Irish startup Instinct

It's probably not significant enough a vocabulary switch to quicken the pulses of the followers of Derrida or Barthes, nevertheless the way some middleware companies are ditching the term 'engine' highlights a shift in the sector. Five years ago everything was an engine; whether it was a games engine, physics engine, networking engine or even artificial intelligence engine. Now, however, some of the game engine companies have moved towards a production-oriented description.

"We're noticing a growing demand for a rich set of out-of-the-box features"

"We started off calling it an engine but as the features it offered became rounder and rounder, it needed another name. It's not fair to call it an engine any more. It's more than that," explains **Frank Gallagher**, Instinct Technology's CEO, of the company's soon-to-be-launched product, Instinct Studio.

A startup based in County Donegal, Ireland, Instinct initially started out developing an honest-to-goodness game engine, but following changing industry consensus during the development process has resulted in technology that's much more flexible in the ways it can be employed. "The ultimate goal is to be a one-stop shop, so depending upon customers' needs we have a middleware platform combined with best-of-breed modules," Gallagher explains. "It's like a Sky package that you can mix and match to get a tailor-made solution."

The process of filling those gaps has seen the company signing deals with physics provider Ageia for its PhysX technology, and Engenuity for its AI.implant system. Further hook-ups with networking and asset management providers, among others, are expected to be announced.

Of course, some companies continue to flaunt the word 'engine', although in many cases it's a legacy marketing

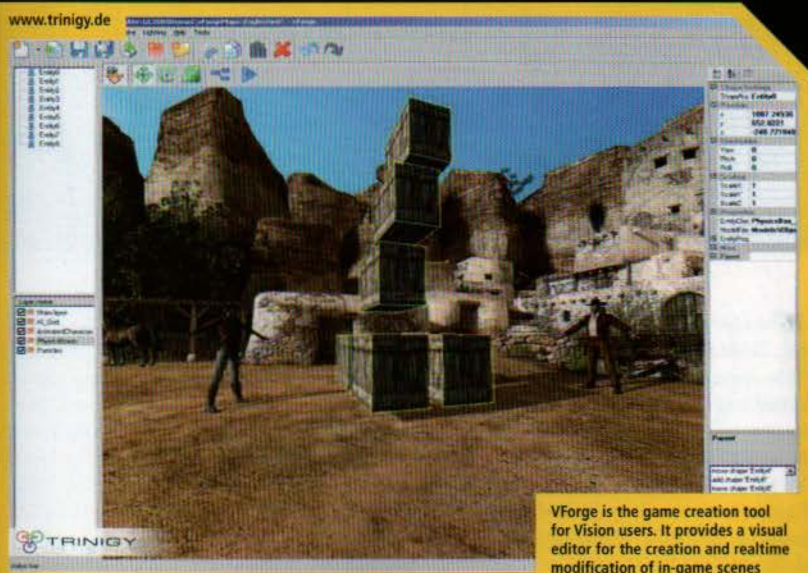
Pull of Jupiter

You might not have heard of Touchdown Entertainment, but you certainly will have heard of the games that have been developed using the middleware technology it offers. Touchdown is the commercial outlet for firstperson shooter specialist Monolith Productions, and its latest release is the Jupiter EX system used to create Monolith's Xbox 360 and PC title *FEAR*. Based around what the company calls a flexible, extensible and data-driven DirectX 9 renderer, it provides features such as normal, specular and emissive maps, and an advanced materials system, and is also integrated with the Havok physics system. This provides rigid body dynamics as well as Havok's new character dynamics for ragdoll effects. Tools include a database editor with hooks available for Alienbrain integration, world and model editors, a special effects editor and exporters for 3ds Max and Maya.

www.touchdownentertainment.com



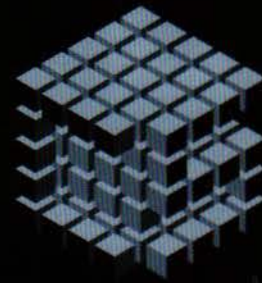
Based on the technology that lay behind Monolith's firstperson shooter *FEAR*, Touchdown Entertainment's Jupiter EX comes with a high-end DirectX 9 renderer plus integrated Havok physics as well as world and object editors



VForge is the game creation tool for Vision users. It provides a visual editor for the creation and realtime modification of in-game scenes

Get the Vision

From its core market of German and eastern European customers, Trinigy is expanding its client base with North American and Asian developers signing up. The latest release, Vision Engine 6, supports Microsoft's forthcoming Vista operating system and its DirectX 10 technology, and handles next-gen graphics features such as parallax mapping, dynamic soft shadows and high dynamic range rendering. However, most of the company's efforts are spent on improving the tools that are integrated with the engine. These include the vForge WYSIWYG visual editor and C# framework; the vEdit 3D scene creation and management system, the vLux static light mapping utility; a shader editor; plus 3ds Max and Maya plug-ins, and various model and resource usage viewers.



decision. The best example is Epic's Unreal Engine, where the title disguises the reason it's a successful product is the huge number of tools that come with it. These range from the UnrealPhAT visual physics modelling tool to the AnimSet Viewer animation viewer, the UnrealKismet visual scripting system and the UnrealMatinee cinematics editor, plus similar systems for handling sound, content creation, terrain generation, materials editing and the inbuilt scripting language. Little wonder then that the company tags Unreal Engine 3 as 'a complete game development framework'. Sadly, Unreal Development Framework 3 just doesn't have the same ring to it.

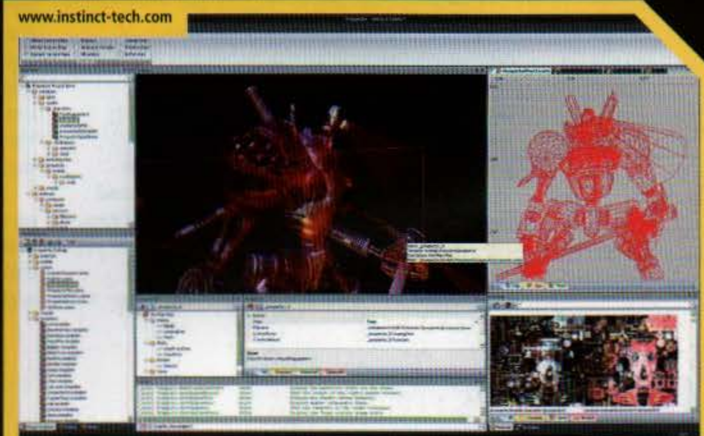
"As games get more complex, more work within game projects moves to higher abstraction levels, such as 'artist-driven' workflows. We're noticing a growing demand for a rich set of out-of-the-box features, as well as the requirement for developers to access the low-level components of the technology they are using too," says **Felix Roeken**, general manager of Trinigy, of the trends the German middleware company is experiencing.

Like Epic, Trinigy still uses the word 'engine' in the naming of its technology, the Vision Engine, but as Roeken explains, the company's focus isn't on technology per se: "Techniques such as normal and parallax maps, specular maps, complex post-processing effects and shaders, tied into exciting gameplay with advanced physics and AI, are expected features for next-gen games," he says.

"Middleware must adapt to the developers' preferred workflow rather than the other way around," Roeken states. "We can't be restricted to technology. For example, it's now mandatory for middleware providers to provide extensive support and customisation services if the customer desires it."

And that's certainly the next step on the launch schedule for Instinct. It's currently got half a dozen companies beta testing Instinct Studio prior to the official release at the Game Developers Conference in spring 2007. "We're in the process of setting up a full user forum, user groups, website with tutorials and blogs," explains Gallagher. Technically, he's also sure the product will match up to the competition thanks to its PC/Xbox 360-supporting unified realtime per-pixel lighting and shadowing renderer, which he claims is as good as anything out there.

What Gallagher remains most proud of, though, is the flexibility offered by Instinct Studio in terms of process efficiencies. "We're emphasising the middleware aspects of Instinct Studio," he enthuses. "We've taken a deliberate decision to be a middleware rather than an engine company, and in terms of the architecture to make technology that works as a production pipeline. It's been a painful process, but that's where our strength comes from."



Trust your Instinct

The Instinct Studio is built around a DirectX 9-supporting rendering engine that handles features such as realtime, per-pixel lighting, normal mapping, specular highlighting and volumetric stencil-buffer shadowing. Elements of the wider toolset include a WYSIWYG visual editor, which enables developers to edit and tweak their gameplay dynamically by adding characters, building environments or adding objects and then playing the resulting levels straightaway. Another part of the Studio approach is the project-based resource management system, which keeps all game assets in a single repository and allows multiple developers to work on the same level simultaneously. An exporter for 3ds Max is provided too, while Instinct is working on support for the Collada file interchange format, and an internal scripting language using the lightweight industry standard Lua.





Above: This technology demo for Instinct Studio shows off the package's per-pixel lighting and specular highlighting features. Right: One example of the modular approach taken by Instinct is the integration of Engenuity's artificial intelligence technology, AI.implant



BY JEFF MINTER

YAK'S PROGRESS Notes from the game designer's workshop

BUYING GAMES, MAKING GAMES

I just got back from town, where I left my Wii deposit in a local game store (on my forum we have an icon invoked by :fnarr: which inserts a small Finnbar Saunders icon into the text; it would doubtless be appropriate here as it is in most Wii-related threads in forums). I'm sixth in the queue this year, as opposed to seventh last year for the 360.

Last time I wrote how I hadn't yet preordered a PS3, and in fact only a couple of days later Sony announced that nobody outside of the US and Japan would be getting them before March anyway, which was pretty much about the timescale I'd been thinking of in getting one myself. Let the early-adopters in other countries put up with the shortages, mad eBay shysters and unknown-quality launch titles. I figure that by March at least more will be known about the system, the quality of the initial lineup will be known and any teething problems clearly identified – enough so that one can make a sane and informed decision about whether and when to buy a not insignificantly expensive bit of equipment. I doubt I'll sign up for the launch-day hoo-hah even in March – I think I'll be ready to purchase once it's been out for a few months, when there are no supply problems and enough released games for me to choose a few absolute corkers.

I guess with the Wii I'm more prepared to take a punt and jump in on launch day, partly because it's a lot cheaper (although it must be said not as cheap as many had hoped), and partly because I know my gaming needs will be satisfied admirably on launch day by *Zelda*. I'm sure the pack-in sports game will be fun in a wave-the-controller kind of a way too, and between that, *Zelda* and the downloadables I'm sure there'll be enough to occupy me.

Launch date buying is always a bit silly, anyway. You generally end up paying over the odds for the hardware in question, and even when you've got it you then often only have a handful of games to choose from, half of which are quite probably rubbish. In this regard I really don't mind that the Wii is a souped-up GameCube with a funky controller – at least I know that the new *Zelda* has already been several years in the making and will likely be Very Good Indeed rather than some tech-demo-turned-game and rushed out for launch.

It's also a bit of silly fun, though. Showing up on the morning of launch day to see which other geeky idiots in your locality have turned out to collect their hardware is always entertaining. Although these days I can't quite help but feel a bit old for it – I'm 44, and most of the punters in Game tend to be in their 20s; I can't help but feel at times like some old fogey going into a nightclub and attempting to get on down to the funky beats with the young 'uns. But hey, I grew up with gaming, spent my 20s being a functional part of the biz, and never let it go; I can't help but think that I'll still be showing up on launch days with my Zimmer frame when I'm an old geezer. I can't see that I'll ever stop gaming, or being enthused by the latest and greatest systems to come out. Hopefully by the time my hands get all arthritic and too crap to hold a joypad (or, indeed, my Wii Remote) we'll all be controlling things with our minds or something; but I'll still be there playing.

> "I don't want to spend months adding bells and whistles that aren't necessary – simple, spectacular and fun is what I'm trying to do"

Speaking of the game shop in Carmarthen, they also sorted out my knackered 0x360 for m and it was rather less fuss than I'd anticipated – I basically just showed up there and said: "Hey, my 360 is bust" and they said: "Oh, OK, here's a new one". Which is now installed under the tell and being used for lashings of *Time Pilot* (still not quite got round yet), *Dead Rising* and *TDU*. I really must restart my half-done game of *Oblivion* too – I more or less packed in serious gaming for the summer, but with winter coming on there's more console time ahead. My poor horse has been waiting in the stables for month now. It's about time we were reunited.

My own game is getting rather more defined now, too – I can string levels together, shoot things and die; it all looks rather pretty althoug I'll have to be careful to balance graphic overloa and actually being able to see what the hell you're doing. There's a nice sweet spot between the two that I'm aiming for. I'm not aiming to make things awfully complex – the whole idea is to have some old-skool gameplay in a new-skool graphical style, and I think I'm achieving that. I don't want to spend months adding bells and whistles that aren't really necessary – keep it simple, spectacular and fun is what I'm trying to do. I'm really enjoying it and, to be honest, I think XBLA needs more such games – yes, the remakes of classic titles are very nice and fun to have, but there's a danger that after a while people will think that's all that comes out for XBLA. It's been a long time since *Geometry War* and *Mutant Storm*, and whereas *Scramble* with nicer graphics is fun for a while there's little meat in many games of that era to bring players back for more than the occasional nostalgia-fuelled go. We need to have more made-for-XBLA games rather than just spruced-up ports, and hopefully my giraffes will contribute to tha

Jeff Minter is the founder of UK codeshop Llamasoft, whose most recent project was Xbox 360's onboard audio visualiser



Illustration: tstokes



BY TIM GUEST

THE GUEST COLUMN Postcards from the online universe

BIG BLUE'S SECOND LIFE

Irving Wladawski Berger, born in Cuba, joined IBM in 1970. Now VP of technical strategy and innovation, he was crucial in the company's survival, leading IBM's efforts to move into supercomputing, and to help clients realise the business benefits of the internet. Now, he's decided virtual worlds will form the next level of the internet, and – perhaps driven by a determination never to go back to more difficult times – he wants his company to be there: to ride the next wave of what he called "the leap from e-business to v-business."

The email invite I received to meet Irving Berger stressed how serious IBM was about virtual worlds. Berger saw virtual worlds as 'signalling the next profound shift in how people use technology', I was informed; virtual worlds were 'the next frontier'. I asked why IBM was so interested in virtual worlds. Berger told me he thought the crucial point of virtual worlds was that they shifted the role of the user: from being controlled by the interface (be it by a visual desktop analogy, or the command line interface) to the user being in charge. He thought of virtual worlds as the "immersive web", with the potential for change "bigger than any before". Virtual worlds now reminded him of the internet in 1993, he told me. "At that time, the internet was growing like never before, but business had not yet discovered it. And it seems like right now we are at the point of a massive initiative, like the internet was in 1995-1996, but business hasn't discovered it." Berger was convinced that along with the benefits of ubiquitous computing, there was a new kind of danger. How do we organise computing when computing is everywhere? "One of our biggest challenges is to make IT systems far more usable to human beings," he told me. Virtual worlds, he thought, were a way to integrate in this new era of distributed computing; a new metaphor to "replace the desktop".

Among the people in real and virtual attendance were the company's EightBall group – scientists, consultants and executives, which they call 'virtual world evangelists' – who hold meetings and experiment in *Second Life*. Ian Hughes, a consulting IT specialist and member of EightBall, led their team in showing me some of their experiments. It was like being inside an IT department from the future. I've written before about Philip K Dick's schizoid visions and their relevance to virtual worlds. This time, the shared influence was direct. Hughes showed me experiments with calling APIs from inside *Second Life*. A man stood in a field and, via a link to Amazon, called up his search results in the air in front of him; he could move them, Minority-Report style, to find the cover he was looking for. Elsewhere, they had mapped a data feed from Wimbledon (which IBM sponsors) on to a virtual version of the court; spectators could watch the match accurately modelled inside *Second Life*, with only a slight delay.

> "A man stood in a field in Second Life and, via a link to Amazon, called up his book search results in the air, Minority Report-style"

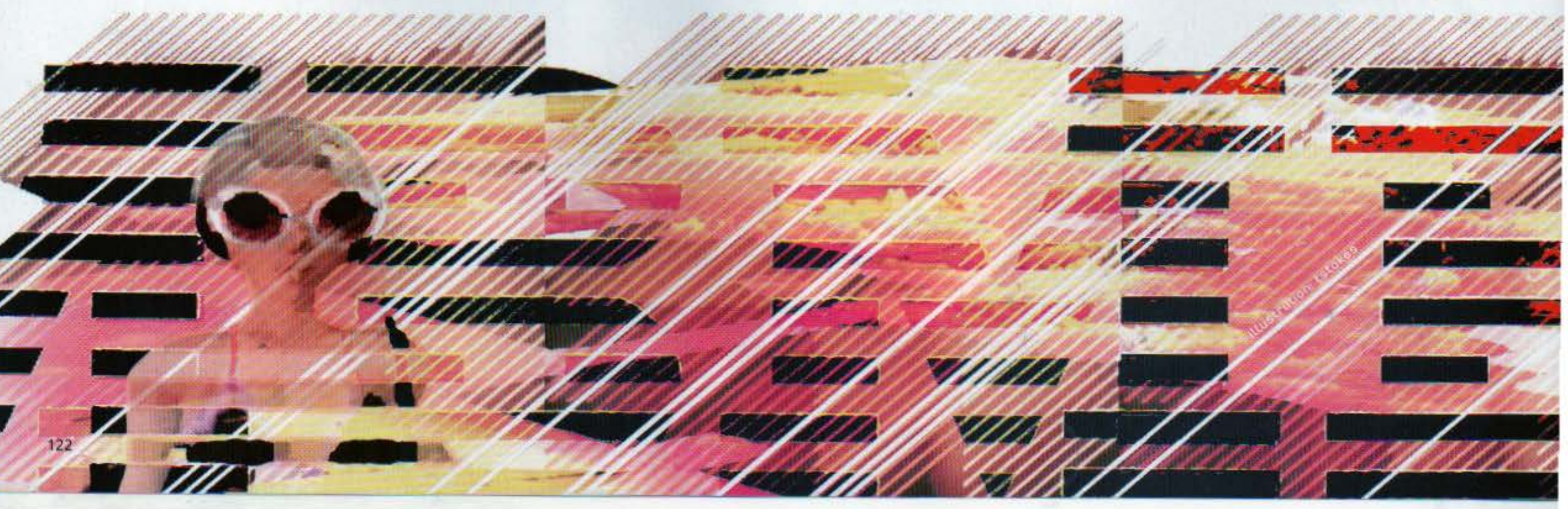
I asked what specifically they were hoping to achieve inside virtual worlds. Their early thoughts are that certain key areas will benefit immediately: customer service, telemedicine, prototyping and e-learning. But the impression was more one of excitement than a concrete goal (so far). A seismic shift was taking place, and it seemed IBM was damn sure it wasn't going to be nearly left behind this time around.

IBM is a large organisation, and, like all large organisations, it has found ways to talk while saying nothing. 'This next-generation web will be a global consortium which means partnering within this grand experiment of technology is fundamental to the success of the 'immersive web' and future business', my invite read, which is another way of saying how nice it is to work with other people. Berger had never actually spent time inside a virtual world, but his lack of virtual attendance didn't matter. When we talked on a more general level, his ability to grasp the over-arching implications was clear.

I asked about the geographic limitations of virtual worlds. Websites are, in one direction, perfectly scaleable; one person or a million people can see the same page. Virtual worlds, on the other hand, can only pack as many people into a certain area as will fit. Berger's perspective was that this would force corporations back into a focus on people. Virtual worlds are inherently democratic; first because, relative to the real world, everything is so easily accomplished, so the competitive advantage of corporations is reduced. Virtual worlds are a level playing field. This is true for the disabled, whose limitations are transcended inside virtual worlds, but it's true for us too, against the might of incorporated groups. Second, though – and it was something I hadn't seen before – Irving pointed out you can only make use of the vastly expanded mode of communication when others are nearby. You're forced to think on a more personal level; and, in a world straining to keep our corporations on a leash, this can only be a good thing.

"This is going to have a huge impact in business and in society," Berger told me, "in ways we do not yet understand at all."

Tim Guest is working on a book about virtual worlds. Contact him if you have a virtual tale to tell via tim@timguest.net




BY MR BIFFO

BIFFOVISION Grumble feature enabled

AND THE WINNER IS...

While George W Bush would like us to believe that there are two types of people in the world – good people (go to church, vote Republican, don't question anything they're told), and evil people (tan skin, beady eyes, smell of garlic, never seen a Ronald Reagan movie) – I suspect the reality is slightly more complex. Not that America has ever let the complexities of reality get in the way of a good war, but that's neither here not there.

Gamers are also often labelled in a simplistic and stupid way by being dumped into one of two categories: hardcore, or casual. I don't really know what either means. 'Hardcore' suggests someone who plays obscure Japanese platform games every day, wears Ken Kutaragi slippers and has a vintage PC Engine under his bed.

A casual gamer is... what? Someone who likes *Tetris*, and perhaps accidentally bought an N-Gage? Someone who plays games once every three days? Someone who is a big fan of *Buzz – The Big Quiz*?

It's a ludicrous over-simplification of the truth, and my skin bristles whenever I see either term used. I mean, what about the rest of us, who are neither casual nor hardcore? I'd like to think I'm somewhere in between, and that my gaming habits, such as they are, transcend witless labels. Yes, I'm passionate about the games I like, but there's far too much going on in life to be playing them all the bloody time. I mean, you don't get fans of other entertainment media being labelled 'hardcore' or 'casual'.

"What do you like doing in your spare time?"

"Well, if I'm honest I'm a bit of a hardcore poetry fan. Look – I've got Ted Hughes tattoos."

I've always felt that it's the inbetweener breed of gamer which Nintendo has always targeted. The people who really like games, but have a life beyond them. Normal people, who just happen to play games. Occasionally.

Ironically, Nintendo has struggled to get its message across to its intended audience. The Game Boy managed to become a market-leading brand by virtue of having the handheld market to itself for many years, but for the last decade-and-a-half Nintendo's consoles have played second fiddle to the aggressively-marketed likes of the Mega Drive and PlayStation. It has always seemed one step removed from the zeitgeist.

And yet it was always that hardcore minority, raised on the purity of Nintendo's philosophy, which claimed Nintendo as its own. Frankly, anyone who thinks *Mario Sunshine* isn't a game for children is deluded, but that didn't seem to matter to the zealots (another horrible term).

> "I'm passionate about the games I like, but there's far too much going on in life to be playing them all the bloody time"

Nintendo couldn't catch a break. Most people seemed to want the best graphics, the best sound and the sexiest logo, and – for the last couple of generations – Nintendo failed to deliver. It ploughed a lonelier furrow, nourishing the gameplay, and a quality over quantity ethic, at the expense of a larger share of the market. It has waited for the bandwagon to roll back into town. And it looks like that day may be here.

My nephew is 22, and also sort of occupies that no-man's land between being a casual gamer and a hardcore gamer. He plays games regularly – *FIFA*, *Burnout* and *Halo* – but you won't find him eulogising about *Kingdom Hearts*.

The other day he said something to me that I found significant: "I don't care whether the graphics aren't as good as the PS3. The games look wicked."

Assuming he was referring to the modern, youthful interpretation of wicked – rather than the more traditional definition ('wilfully or knowingly causing pain or distress to others') – this, to me, signifies a cultural shift. He, as a populist, Nintendo-shunning, mainstream console buyer, wants a Nintendo Wii.

Could it be that Nintendo has finally won? Could the years of gameplay over graphics have at last paid off? I bloody hope so. It's as if people have suddenly realised that if all you're going to use technology for is to make the games look prettier, then what's the point?

It gets to the core of how fundamentally Sony has misjudged the current state of the market. Aside from the ludicrousness of its prohibitive, elitist price-point, the ballsed-up release date, the sheer pointlessness of its HD-DVD drive (you can forget HD-DVD, or Blu-ray – both will go the way of Betamax), and the desperate 'we can do good gameplay stuff too' vibe given off by the last-minute motion-sensitive controller, Sony has simply misread what people now want from games.

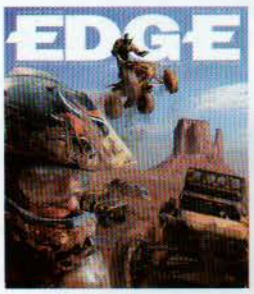
The market has shifted in the last couple of years, and the grand irony is that Sony has helped it shift. When you look at the success of *SingStar*, and the innovation of the EyeToy, it comes as a surprise that Sony isn't making more of the new styles of gaming offered by the PS3 (especially surprising when its plans for the *SingStar* brand appear to be genuinely brilliant). Instead, it has focused on a sort of vague and lacklustre 'the same sort of games, but with better graphics, and a controller that's a bit like the Wii controller, only less good' message.

Frankly, the PS3 is screwed, and Nintendo is set to be crowned king. You just wait and see.

Mr Biffo co-founded Digitiser, Channel 4's Teletext-based videogames section, and now writes mainly for television


illustration: tatokes

inbox



Issue 168

F

ONLINE OFFLINE

Choice cuts from Edge Online's discussion forum

Topic: Mii maker thing

Some fanboy types have made a Mii emulator thing so you can make a Mii of your selves before the Wii comes out. It's at www.joystiq.com/media/2006/10/mii.swf if you want to make one.
monkeytown

No top hats. Failed.
Unlikely

No ear-lasers either, which won't do at all.
Mr. Brooks

A nice distraction and a scarily accurate representation of me. Apart from the head, which looks nothing like me.
darthjim

Right, now it looks like I can't buy a Wii either 'cause there's no option for Mii. Just 'cause I don't fit in doesn't mean I should be excluded.
cockbeard

I'm surprised Nintendo and Microsoft didn't bother to consult you when they were getting ideas together for their new consoles.
Lerxst

Can I just take this opportunity, simply and unashamedly, to say thank you for the article on *Guardian Heroes* – and indeed the entire Time Extend feature. It has been a brilliant addition to your magazine, a belt-loosening opportunity for your writers to fully explore a game beyond the lean precision of your reviews.

Guardian Heroes is one of a thimble-full of games that I truly treasure (no pun intended), the kind of irreplaceable collector's item that I would risk life and limb to save in the event of my house ever burning down. The vibrancy of the graphics, the depth of its gameplay and the almost comedic levels of anger the Golden Warrior exhibits never fail to inspire utter joy and laughter. Along with *Super Probotector* and *Yoshi's Island*, it represents the zenith of my 2D gaming experience.

However, I ignored the Sega Saturn upon its release, seduced as I was by Sony's trance-inducing polygons and techno beats. It was not until many years later that I bought one, solely to play *Guardian Heroes*, but subsequently to discover a minefield of other gems such as *Vampire Saviour* and *Panzer Dragoon*. Perhaps it is the revisionism of hindsight, but I find something almost elegiac about the game, a simultaneous celebration of its (then) cutting-edge aesthetics and an acknowledgement of its own anachronistic existence. Like a Leone or Peckinpah western, *GH* goes out all guns blazing in a heroic yet futile act to save the 2D scrolling brawler, Once Upon a Time on the Saturn.

The passing of time should not be lamented. Your Time Extend feature does however allow us to reappraise, reflect, rediscover and even unearth for the first time some classic moments in gaming's history. Now please would you hurry up and release that **Edge** Top 100 you promised us!
Andrew Merrington

The **Edge** Top 100 is on hold for now, but November 9 sees the launch of our new series, File. See p18 for details.

"The vibrancy of the graphics, the depth of gameplay and the almost comedic levels of anger the Golden Warrior exhibits never fail to inspire utter joy"



Win a DS Lite for the best letter

E167 raised the issue of genre; specifically what label should be given to games that resemble the *GTA* franchise. The biggest problem with genre (also applicable to films and music) is that a given genre never intends to define a strict set of guidelines for other products to be defined by. But thinking along these lines, one re-occurring issue is how games are constantly compared to the film industry. I would like to suggest that perhaps videogames' closest relation may be television.

For starters, they share the same equipment (the television screen) and are both enjoyed in a similar manner. Like games, television is widespread across the globe, and you'd have a tough time finding anyone who has never seen a TV show or played a videogame once (if they were entirely honest) to see what the fuss is all about. But unlike films, neither is normally considered as a serious artform.

As for genre, take some of the most popular television shows at the moment: CSI, Law and Order, Without a Trace, The Shield. All four (including the various spin-offs) can be labelled simply as cop shows, but the difference in style, pace and performance is huge. Perhaps the most significant genre in recent years to take over the airwaves will clarify my point: reality shows. The reality show genre is a complex mechanism, not least because it doesn't offer any 'reality'. Instead, the genre has grown out of the documentary style: a sense of immediacy and immersion, realistic settings, raw emotion. *GTA* arguably falls in line with these conditions: the illusion of a digital world without boundaries, settings which generally represent contemporary society, and makes a considered effort to fuse story-driven events and characters to counterbalance the chaotic world that often resides within.

As a suggestion, perhaps the '*GTA*-a-like' genre should be named RG (reality game). After all, the one rule which has been set since *Super Mario 64* is the over-the-shoulder camera perspective. The 'reality' doesn't denote its ability to actually represent reality, as it never intends to: rather, it describes the style in which the programmers and artists paint the world the protagonist plays in and how the gamer interprets the actions on screen. My character is

driving that brand-name car, listening to my music, killing people with that real-life gun, getting paid for a job well done, being arrested by the police for committing a crime. Furthermore, the purpose of these games and television programmes are the same: the voyeuristic appeal of watching supposed 'average Joes' doing the extraordinary.
Misfire Dodds

It's vital that gaming moves beyond its obsession with film, and learns from other, more varied, media. These wise words win you a DS Lite.

I never usually watch Tonight with Trevor McDonald, but the prospect of a study into the addictive nature of computer games on the September 18 programme caught my eye. Perhaps obviously, it did very little to explore the addictive nature of those studied, instead emphasising the dangers of playing games. The study involved a child of six and two teenagers, who were undeniably devoted to gaming. But the fact that the study took place during the school holidays, when the children were free to do whatever they wanted, no doubt inflated the amount of hours played. While they were still gaming excessively, when a child has no other responsibilities (or maybe even hobbies) during a break from school, then little else can be expected.

In trying to wean the children off gaming, it was decided they would be allowed to play for only an hour a day. That seems a reasonable amount of time, but it again shows the lack of understanding for the structure of computer games. If you were reading a novel, you wouldn't set yourself a time limit and stop mid-way through a sentence would you? Instead, you would read until you naturally felt you had read enough. As many games have the same narrative structure, it is unreasonable to ask to stop after exactly an hour. The majority of games cannot be held to a time limit, and it was refreshing to hear an ELSPA representative look bewildered at the suggestion that games should be equipped with one, saying that it is more important to take personal responsibility, and play in moderation.

So while I must agree that there is a danger of a section of gamers becoming addicted, there was a certain bias to the programme that neglected to focus on the larger problems that led to people becoming reclusive and self absorbed. But once again it emphasises the vilification of computer games as part of 'junk culture' – if they're not forcing children to become violent, then they're keeping them away from the real world. It is this narrow minded focus that really frustrates, as there must be a larger issue that forces children into the gaming world for hours on end. Then again, with a sensationalist title in TV guides asking 'Could Video Games Be Killing My Kids?' it may have been too much to expect a balanced focus between the


Andrew Merrington doesn't lament the passing of time, but does lament the passing of Treasure's magnificent *Guardian Heroes*

"The purpose of games and television programmes are the same: the voyeuristic appeal of watching supposed 'average Joes' doing the extraordinary"


***Dead Rising*'s Frank West killed Jonathan F Condliffe's enthusiasm for videogames, presumably with a super-heated frying pan**

Topic: Reclaim your life!
www.levelmy360.com – salvation? We're talking about your very soul's fate here.
Arbre

I can just imagine the happy little battery-farm of Asians manning that service... "Silence, #34567. 700 more orcs, *then*, maybe, we feed you. And let your children out of the gimp-suits."
Mr. Brooks

"Hmmm, after spending £50 on this game I find I can no longer be arsed to play it. Slave! Play this game for me." Actually, there's probably something serious to be said here about proof that games are too much like hard work these days, but I can't be bothered to follow it up. Or maybe it's simply down to egos. Anyone who needs this service to improve their imaginary social standing among people they'll never meet needs serious help.
Pause

I guess there are some poeple out there that are so focused on having a big score to their name, that they forget what it is supposed to represent. But then even Peter Moore said that the players with the biggest score must be spending a very unhealthy ammount of time on their gaming.
Growl

A fool and his money are soon parted.
Destrier

I agree with everyone's comments but I must admit that I do get a little happy wave of satisfaction when that 'Achievement Unlocked' cup pops up at the bottom of my screen. Oh, and I always compare my gamerscore to my online 'friends'. And it makes me feel better about myself when I have a higher score than them. Actually, fuck it, I'm sending my gamertag over to Korea! I need more points!
Blueprint

I love the way one of the plans is described as being for 'true players'. So 'true' they don't actually play their own games.
TheConge

true nature of addiction and the millions of gamers worldwide who combine a social life with their electronic worlds.
Craig Williams

In the 'age of the individual,' community ritual has taken a back seat. The possibility for catharsis through ceremonial sacrifice of a scapegoat or surrogate victim is much diminished. Gamers, however, are not the first to turn to a virtual victim. All manner of 'evil spirits' have been envisaged throughout human history for the purpose of exorcising violent impulses without resorting to causing real-world harm.

If we can see games in this light then it might help explain why violence in games is defended with such religious fervour yet rarely understood or properly justified by more than a 'freedom of speech' argument. It might also explain the many games with simplistic storylines that do little more than provide a fig leaf for the violence.
Peter Westmacott

The Trevor McDonald show demonstrated yet again what an easy target games are for moral hysteria, and how little impact the ample evidence for gaming's neutral – or beneficial – effects has had.

For the past 20 years (I'm now 46) I have collected videogames. Hundreds in fact, spread across at least 12 formats. I started with *Sonic* back whenever and last week bought *Dead Rising*. I subscribe to **Edge** and own every copy back to issue 53, but have finally decided that enough is enough and intend to hand my gaming spurs.

Why? well it's because I realise that the latest incarnation of games have nothing to offer me. *Dead Rising* is a perfect case in point. I found it frustrating, fractured and despite being play-tested on three different TVs the dialogue lines are unreadable, negating the entire storyline. Truth be told I have never got on with any of the *Resident Evil* series (save part four) but I had high hopes for this reincarnation – boy was I wrong! Constant restarts, a lumbering central character, forced story interjections every five seconds

Continued

and annoying beyond belief... then I had my epiphany!

I am too old for this crap. At the very time in my life when I can afford to spend nearly £50 on a game the games available are not worth it. Just as a console reaches a plateau where the developers have got to grips with the architecture and the occasional title emerges that allows for satisfying gameplay they suddenly want to produce a product that strips out the very thing that makes it worthwhile and try to produce a playable novel, comic or film. The entire process seems to be built on foundations of frustration, it seems from reading your interviews that developers within the industry want to be anywhere but where they are, and not in a positive way.

It seems that the industry is now populated with artists, writers, producers and directors with failed ambitions in Hollywood who have settled for games as a stepping stone to somewhere else. That's what is driving the technology at present, a desire to transmute games to film... well tough. It ain't gonna fly!

Consider this: by the 1920s film was on the verge of commercial sound, colour stock was available, mise en scène, the language of film, was already highly developed. People had been paying to watch flickering images for over a quarter of a century. In the hands of a master the technology allowed for unbelievable expression and subtlety, audiences wept, gasped or on occasion even rioted at the images placed before them. Think this is ever going to happen with a console game? Ha!

Games as we understand them (commercial product heavily marketed with a few identifiable stars) are 25 years old. Yet the product touches no one, it is ephemeral, transient and like morning mist it dissolves leaving no trace save a few cracked cases in a bargain bin. I suspect the industry realises this and churns out even more product in the vain hope that no one notices. It's Top Trumps at £50 a pop.

Hence my intention to stop collecting, I'll carry on subscribing but to be honest I can't see that continuing for much longer. I stuck with you for a lot longer than most but I've had enough, (cue final sarcastic comment) It's not so much a case of *Dead Rising* as Gorge Rising...

Jonathan F Condliffe

Could you hang on for a month? The Wii sounds tailor-made for you: plenty old-school Sonic and no games that wish they were films in sight.

F

Topic: GEARS OF...

Ah, *Gears Of War*. I know what's going to ruin it for me. I've followed its development and watched the videos, and now that it's nearly done, I imagine I won't be able to enjoy it. The problem won't be the gameplay, the graphics, the controls or anything like that, it will be... the voiceacting. Did anyone else notice? When games get past this generetic American macho bullshit, I'll be able to enjoy them again. Give me mute avatars, any day.
blockhead

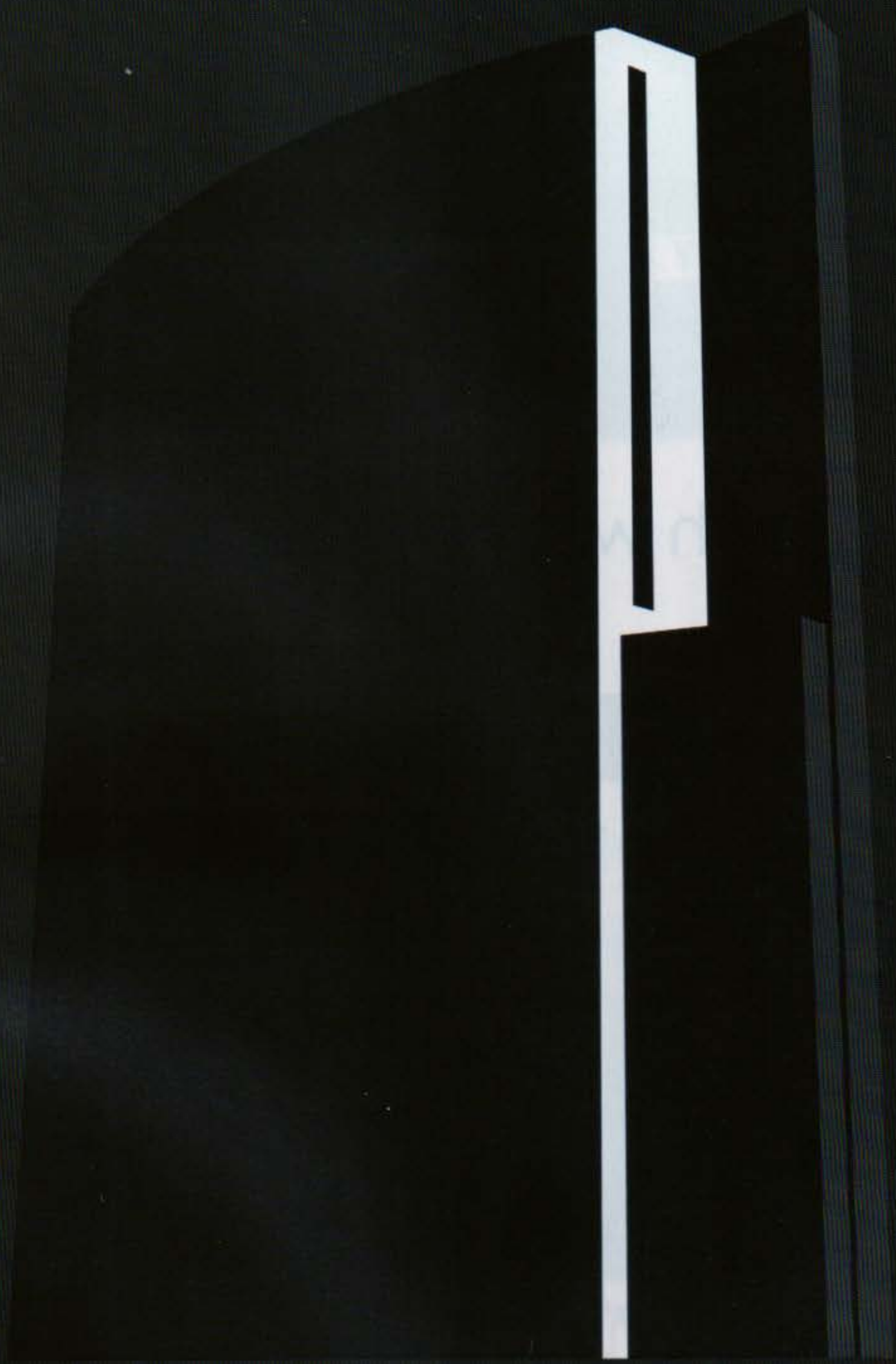
It can become tiresome. I'd like to mention *Halo* here. There's still plenty of gung-ho stuff going on, but it's a little tongue in cheek, and they also manage to throw in some different nationalities to mix it up a little, and gives the impression that you're fighting for Earth, not the US.
Facewon

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